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William Cresap: Interview Transcript

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Benjamin Halpern questions and comments in italics.

Interview With: William Cresap

Date of Interview: 4/08/2016

Location of Interview: Rural Champaign County

Transcribed by: Jessica Craig

Date(s) of Transcription: 8/30/2016

Length of Interview: 00:23:30

BH: William is a beef farmer at a multi-generational farm in Champaign County. I will be conducting an interview with Mr. Cresap today. The interview will be for Dr. Debra Reid, Department of History, Eastern Illinois University. Debra has composed the interview and written the questions that will be asked. When the material is generated it will be turned over to Dr. Reid who will in turn, turn this over to the digital archives of Eastern Illinois University's Booth Library. The material will eventually be made available to the public through The Keep, the digital archive of Eastern Illinois University. Once it is made available to the public, other entities can link to it. The public will, genuinely, have access to the information. I think we will have some good information here on agriculture as it exists today in Champaign County. Mr. Cresap are you okay with being interviewed and having the material be turned over to Dr. Reid?

WC: Yes

BH: When did you begin farming?

WC: 1989

BH: You grew up here on the farm, right?

WC: Yes

BH: What did farming involve? When you say 1989, how old were you when you started farming?

WC: 18. I actually rented ground when I was a senior in high school.

BH: Ground here on the farm?

WC: Some other ground, my dad farmed this. I've had cows since I was about 10 years old. So I have had my own producing beef cows since I was 10 years old.

BH: Tell me a little about what farming was like at that time, what did farming involve when you got into it.

WC: More work! (laughs) We didn't have the technology, it was all baling hay, taking care of cows, and working ground. Not worrying about your cell phone ringing every five minutes, and the technology that we have today.

BH: What did you raise here on the farm?

WC: Corn, beans, cattle, oats and hay.

BH: How did you get into farming?

WC: My father farmed. It was a family business, so I've been on a tractor since I was seven years old. I worked every day after school!

BH: What role did your family play on the farm? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

WC: I had two sisters. One of them actually worked in the field with us and ran the combine. My mom ran the combine. My other sister was the cook and the house cleaner. We all worked, everybody had their jobs.

BH: When you got married and started your own family, how did they become involved?

WC: My wife works off the farm. It takes a lot more acres to raise a family than it used to thirty years ago. My two kids are pretty young- they are twelve and seven. So they are not really involved with the farm. They do a little bit of 4H and livestock showing.

BH: When you farm, it's a year round occupation, but around here we have different seasons. If you could, please describe some of the seasonal routines. What do you do at different types of the year and how does that yearly cycle define the operation?

WC: We start off in the spring by planting oats. We put our nitrogen on during the spring as a form of anhydrous before we plant. Then we are in to planting, we plant corn and then beans. Then it is hay-baling time. We bale hay all summer. We combine oats during the summer. During all this, we are constantly hauling manure and doing daily livestock care.

BH: What does that involve?

WC: We clean the barns every three months. The outside lots we haul, sometimes weekly, or as weather permits.

BH: Is there any yearly cycle you go through for livestock? In other words are there different times for breeding?

WC: We sold our mamma cows about three years ago. We buy calves and finish them out. We buy 6-7 week old calves and feed them out to 1400lbs.

BH: How long does that take?

WC: 7-8 months

BH: Do you sell them at auction?

WC: I sell to a private buyer.

BH: What have been some of the biggest changes you've seen to your routines over the time that you've been farming?

WC: Well we don't farm as much ground as we used to, but we feed more cattle. I guess my father would- we were on self-feeders then, ground ear corn. Haul manure, maybe twice a year, if we could get that done. Now we feed everyday with a feed wagon, rather than grinding feed once a week. That's one of the biggest changes we've made. Everything that gets fed to the cattle gets shipped in. We don't use any of our own crops that we raise to feed our livestock. We try and raise specialty crops, and sell them. Then we find cheaper, more efficient feed for the cattle. Those are probably some of the biggest changes.

BH: At one time did the farm raise it's own feed?

WC: Yes, we put ears of corn in the crib. That's pretty much what we ground and fed to the cattle. That all came off of our own farm. Now we go out and we find shelled corn or screenings or whatever we can find. We feed DDGs, which is a by-product of making ethanol. We feed a syrup product, which is a by-product of making ethanol, also silage.

BH: Tell me a little about how other farmers may work together. Do other farmers come and help? Do you help other people who are close by? What is the role of your peer in how the operation is run?

WC: It's not like it used to be. I can remember my father and his friends who farmed helped each other all the time. Now a days farming is cutthroat. There are guys who are trying to break ground all the time. If I'm recorded, I don't want to say anything too bad. If a farmer sees that you can't get your work done, he is going to come in and try to cash out your grain. You have to worry about that. As far as someone getting sick or ill, or a neighbor having bad luck, yes, there is still that out there where the farmer will come in. You don't have to worry about anything; they will take care of you. There is all kinds of different farmers out there. That's just the way it is.

BH: What about the role of different businesses that may affect your farm or agriculture in general. For example, I'm sure that you interact with banks, you sell your grain to an elevator. How has that changed? What is the role of different businesses that you interact with?

WC: There are so many more niche crops, specialty crops, that you can market now and work with so many end users. It's not like you have to just raise regular corn and regular beans and take them to the elevator. For instance, I raise all seed beans. All my beans are for seed for the farmer for the next year, for a small company.

BH: And you sell that directly to the company?

WC: Directly to the company. All my oats are seed oats, they are sold directly to the company. They are not fed, I don't take them to the elevator to sell them, they are certified seed oats.

BH: So you have a direct market for that?

WC: Yes

BH: Is there a bank that you work with?

WC: Yes, I've got a very good banker. I've been in business with him for twelve years now. It's hard to find a banker that wants to borrow money or deal with livestock. We have a very good relationship, and he has helped me as much as I've done business with them.

BH: So it's a back and forth relationship? He helps keep you going and you help him keep going?

WC: Oh yea, I talk to my banker once a week.

BH: How about the UofI extension, do you have any contact with the extension?

WC: Not much

BH: Has that changed over the years?

WC: Not really, I have called the UofI to get some information on manure sampling and a couple of specialty crops. Nothing major.

BH: Do you use or subscribe to different agricultural journals?

WC: Oh yea. Farm Week is a good one that gives a lot of information. Also Prairie Farmer, and Successful Farming are good magazines that we try and read.

BH: So you get some valuable information there?

WC: Oh yes.

BH: I know you were showing me one from the Illinois Beef Producers.

WC: Yep, the Illinois Beef Producers for the cattle side. Farm week is probably the best.

BH: Can you provide an example of how you solved a major challenge on the farm?

WC: We have a major problem with our cattle. We went through the Department of Ag to get a grant to put up a new feed lock shed. They aren't paying for all of it, by any means, it is a cost-share thing, but that is one of the biggest things we've ever had to do.

BH: So you did work with people off the farm?

WC: Yes the USDA and the FSA.

BH: Are you interested at all in history?

Yea somewhat, more of just my family history, not much of the other.

BH: Do you do any activities to look in to that history?

WC: Not really. The farm keeps me consumed pretty well. I don't have much time for hobbies.

BH: One of the things we want to know is how have past decisions and personal experience effected the decisions you are making now? In other words, your dad has had experiences, you've learned from him, you've experienced things over the years- how does that effect how you do things now?

WC: Well as I get older, the most important thing is to slow down and research it before you make any decision. Take your time and don't act emotions. Emotions are the worst thing in farming, as far as grain marketing or any of that.

BH: Can you give an example of how your experiences or memories effect decisions? You were talking a little about acting on emotional, how might you react to a situation that may come up.

WC: I can give you an example. Grain marketing used to be acting on emotion, as far as it's drying up, the crops a good price, lets sell some grain. Now we don't sell grain, we buy protection on the board. We've got a marketing guy we work with all the time. That helps us sleep at night; we've got our crops protected. All the cattle are protected.

BH: What more do you think you need to help make these informed decisions? Any other information that you think could be of help?

WC: I would say more experience. We have been doing this for three years. Hopefully the longer we do it the better we get at it.

BH: What concerns you the most? What are things that may keep you up at night, or do you think about in terms of operation?

WC: Payments is the first one. To be real, the government regulations, the nitrogen regulations that we are coming up against, fertilizer regulations, manure regulations, everything now has a regulation on it. That is a constant fight, and a constant need to know. The worst problem with this is that you have to go through so many channels to get the right answer. You can talk to five different people and they will have five different answers from the government. That would be the worst for me.

BH: Are there people out there who can help you sift through that, or is there a network you can tie into so that you know that when you make a decision you are making it based on reality?

WC: Yes, you have to go to the top of it, the United States Department of Ag or one of those to find your answers. You just have to get there.

BH: So there are folks that you can get that from directly?

You have some at the University of Illinois, the extension part of that.

BH: What excites you about the possibilities of farming or running the farm in the future?

WC: I enjoy the niche markets, the organic, any specialty crops. They have blue corn and purple corn and red corn, stuff that you can get into. Its premium, so you can make more money, but its more work and more segregation.

BH: So you do some of that?

WC: We are working on it.

BH: Is that something that your children may get into in the future?

WC: They might. They are at such a young age right now that I'm not going to force them into farming. Like I mentioned earlier, I was on a tractor since I was seven, it was always, "You're going to farm, that's just the way it is." I'm willing to let them do their own thing.

BH: What do you believe new farmers need to know in order to start a business or stay in business? That's for both people who are moving into the field and people who have grown up on a farm, like you did. What advice would you give to them?

WC: Any young farmer will need some help getting in. Whether they work for someone who retires and gives them a little ground, or they have their father. Probably the most important thing is to have a good relationship with their banker. We can't farm without banks, at least I couldn't, and younger people can't do it. It has changed to where some of the older guys, who have been farming for 60 years is pretty self sufficient. The younger generation is going to have a rough time. Don't get into having to have all the new

equipment, do what makes sense. Whether it is leasing, or buying older equipment to get started, it is what you have to do.

BH: In other words, don't get in over your head. Make sure you can make do with little at first and then work up incrementally.

WC: Yes.

BH: What do you consider the most rewarding aspect of your job?

WC: The freedom to do what I want when I want! Being able to do something different each day, whether it's working cattle, or in the field, or in the shop working on equipment.

BH: That's great. Anything else you would like to tell me or the public who might listen to this conversation?

WC: I don't think so. I think I'm good.

BH: Thank you very much for your time and for allowing us to share what you are doing on the farm. The process of transcribing this interview may take a while. We, meaning Dr. Reid, will send you the transcription in the mail with directions on how to make changes. We look forward to sharing the information you are willing to share with the general public via Eastern Illinois University's The Keep, that is their digital archives, and linked to EIU's PastTracker, a digital archive of Illinois primary documents. We look forward to remaining in contact and sharing progress about this project as it continues to develop and as we continue to produce additional websites and documentaries about the evidence we find. Thank you very much for being a part of this project.

WC: Thank you.