

**CONNECTICUT 20TH CENTURY AGRICULTURAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORIES**

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Name of Person Interviewed: Frank Niederwerfer
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LL: This is [Lou Anne Lang] on October 4th, 2000, interviewing Frank Niederwerfer. Frank, would you start please by telling us where you were born?

FN: I was born on a home farm in South Windsor, Connecticut. [Unintelligible].

LL: In South Windsor on a family farm?

FN: Yes. We didn't get a chance to get another – we got a chance to get nicer. I think they were kept to the last minute from the time of the first and last year.

LL: Okay, let me stop here. Alright, let's try the sound here again. So you said you were born in South Windsor on a family farm, on the farm. Did you have brothers and sisters?

FN: Oh, yes. The main part of the family, there were, let's see, a brother and three sisters.

LL: We're fine now, okay. Did you all grow up on the farm? Did you stay on that farm?

FN: Okay. Yes. I stayed on the farm but our sisters married and they moved off the farm. I mean probably somewhere along the agriculture or making wine, somewhere along that line. I think that they asked me or anything like that. What else should I tell you?

LL: Do you remember – how many acres did your family farm or what kind of farming did you do?

FN: I had a dairy herd and goat's milk. I mean, I had goat's milk. Yes. That was [Unintelligible] care of the goat's milk. I worked on the family farm.

LL: Until you were married?

FN: Yes. This is one of the hardest things for me to talk about.

LL: Sure.

FN: Because I've been keeping it. It wasn't chiselled into stone anywhere along the line.

LL: Okay, sure. It wasn't chiselled in stone, that's right. It's hard to pick that. Well, did you stay on the family farm or did you eventually buy your own farm?

FN: No, I stayed on the family farm and then I took over the operation of the family farm.

LL: Did you work with your dad for a while before you took over and then he died? Is that what happened?

FN: Well, my dad had a poultry business. He raised young chicks until they became old enough to lay eggs and when he had the opportunity like that, he came to continue his egg business on the family farm, there was no interference on the family farm with the family farm. It was [Unintelligible].

LL: Your mother and dad stayed on the farm and you stayed on that farm until you married? Then when did they go to a dairy farm?

FN: Well, my dad had always had some cows. I mean [Unintelligible] – I supposed it's on the record that's pretty much – of course, I wasn't on the probably for a permanent [Unintelligible] or something like that.

LL: Were you in 4H too when you were a young person?

FN: Oh yes, that's really how I became involved in that. The extension program they got there, I mean they only take a lot where they're involved in the extension program like Mr. AJ [Unintelligible] and obviously [Trevor Burin] who was [Unintelligible].

LL: Did you go to Camp Vale?

FN: Oh yes, I went to Camp Vale.

LL: There's a picture here.

FN: Yes, that's [Unintelligible] in this picture here. I'm in the picture here, and then Franklin [Brocket].

LL: Franklin Brocket?

FN: Yes. I kind of turned around [Unintelligible] with Betty [Grover-Pod].

LL: Betty Grover-Pod?

FN: And Don Gaylord.

LL: Don Gaylord, yes.

FN: He was the one that talked to my family, my mom and dad about that I should continue made the connection with the extensions program that I [Unintelligible] extension with people in the United States Navy and [Unintelligible] it was good. The one thing that I honestly [Unintelligible] to work on, they always were very [Unintelligible] thing.

LL: The women looked like they had uniforms. The dresses were all alike.

FN: That's right. Most of these women made their own dresses out of [Unintelligible]. A lot of women sewn that. They made that – all the dresses that were like that. So, that was good [Unintelligible]. I was part of that [Unintelligible] exposition, and so [Unintelligible] every year and we were in this – Camp Vale was a place that we worked to go to and it represented people of agriculture and homemaking [Unintelligible].

LL: So you had to get selected to go to Camp Vale?

FN: Oh yes, there was a selection that they made, and Betty Pod and Don Gaylord were there, 45 acres. It had a lot to do with striking that and having to go to Camp Vale. This is a [Unintelligible] for Camp Vale.

LL: Was this in the 1920s, about or earlier, do you think – later?

FN: Later.

LL: I was looking at your hat and I was thinking like...

FN: Oh, [Unintelligible].

LL: Now, what did you demonstrate? Each person who went did something. Do you remember what you did?

FN: Well, I and another fellow did the [Unintelligible] on canning. I can just remember what we didn't can. [Laughter] We canned – I think it was tomatoes or something like that, something that you could get for a long season and [Unintelligible]. We demonstrated canning tomatoes and we told them what to watch out for and the canning tomatoes like that, that there are [Unintelligible] of not doing the process right, and then they [spoil] on the person that didn't do it, the kind of the process that we are exactly like they're supposed to be handled like that. I mean we had Ms. Pod and Don Gaylord and – oh, I can't [Unintelligible] and we demonstrated the canning process at this expedition.

LL: Did you also show any livestock?

FN: I never showed – I mean I got old too fast. I was in the forest program and then he went in the forest program after that too. [Unintelligible], but I talked to Mr. Gaylord and Betty Pod and they – this is a picture of the [Unintelligible] expedition.

LL: Do you remember much about school?

FN: Oh, I spent six years at a one-room school in the Dart Hill District.

LL: Dart Hill?

FN: Dart Hill District in [Unintelligible] in South Windsor. I kind of [Unintelligible]. I always represented young people as – I represented young people at school but I wasn't sure I want to get in that. Then the activities of the young people and, actually, we could go ahead and easily move the livestock around and we could move the [Unintelligible] livestock.

LL: How did you get to school?

FN: Well, I'll tell you, first six years I went to a one-room school and I still think that's the best schooling that I've ever gotten. We were at a one-room school for six years.

LL: Did you walk to school, ride a school bus?

FN: No, we walked to school. There was no buses at that time. Either we walked or in the wintertime, our family got together with the other families and we would get...

LL: So you shared rides?

FN: What do you mean we shared rides?

LL: Well, did you...

FN: I don't think I went...

LL: If you walked to school – you said you were with other families. Oh, tell me about your neighbours on the farm. The neighbours to your farm.

FN: Well, see, Niederwerfer Road was a snaking road between East Windsor and South Windsor, and we shared rides with – of course, you got to remember that – everybody must remember that...

LL: The town at the time?

FN: I just paved the way on that, the way that I wanted to use that.

LL: That's okay.

FN: I mean the way that I wanted to use that.

LL: You did work the road that connected the two towns.

FN: Yes, it connected the – for instance, people would ask me, "Did you buy the road? Is that why it became Niederwerfer Road?" I just smile and say we didn't buy anything. We worked and because we worked and we came from an area just out of South Windsor. It's right I'd say in Hartford County, but our work was done mostly as an out-of-county extension agent and [Unintelligible] Don Gaylord and one of the other ladies, Ms. Pod. Then Don Gaylord [Unintelligible].

LL: How long has your family been on that farm?

FN: Forever.

LL: [Laughter] Okay. How did your father end up there? He was born there too?

FN: No. My dad, [Unintelligible] he was involved in the –

LL: How did – I have a -

FN: The very first place, the extension program when I had entered, it moved the program to the most people. Our parents liked that. I can remember Mr. AJ [Unintelligible] they would go along with some kind of a program like this, thinking they were concerned that they wouldn't go along with the program because it would take too much of my time away from the farm work. I think that was a big [Unintelligible] and I came out and sat down with my mother and dad and told them what the program

was like and they were very happy to become involved in something like this, that I should become involved in something like this. That's how we got in there like that, but we...

LL: What were some of the changes that took place while you were farming, whether extension brought them in or whether you read about them or heard about them? What were some of the changes that you...

FN: Well, that was – I think one of the most important things is [Unintelligible] Mr. Gaylord who was a [Unintelligible]. Like I said, my parents were concerned about how much time this would take away from the other [Unintelligible] that I was supposed to be doing, and once they realized what the program was like, they [Unintelligible].

LL: How did it help your own farm, do you think?

FN: Well, I think that I became a very enthusiastic member of the extension program and...

LL: Did you bring some changes to the farm about either how the chickens were raised or how you did the dairy?

FN: Oh yes, that was the day things were changing very rapidly, I mean both in the dairy and the poultry businesses. There were new ideas that were being brought in through the state extension program and that's where Mr. [Brunderstein] entered the picture through the state forest extension [Unintelligible] and they realized that they had somebody that cared, that I was interested in saving farmland in South Windsor and the state of Connecticut. I was so interested in that that I became a member of the South Windsor Wildlife Sanctuary.

LL: It looks here on this like the conservation commission turned over – you entered on Niederwerfer Road. Was this part of your property back then that was used for the wildlife sanctuary?

FN: [Unintelligible] a walking trail that I helped develop here in South Windsor through the wildlife sanctuary. Niederwerfer Road started here in [Unintelligible] groups of people that [Unintelligible] and being pushed along by the people here that wanted to know a little more about the wildlife sanctuary [Unintelligible] in the town of South Windsor. I kept [Unintelligible] as something that we had to be pushing, the South Windsor Wildlife Sanctuary here. I think [Unintelligible] what we can do here. We just put a sign up that this is the South Windsor Wildlife Sanctuary, and the only people out there that – we only put a walking area. There wasn't even – you could drive through it with a motorcycle, but any other kind of vehicle – I mean it was just a walking area. As I pushed for this very strongly, it became a part of my life. The wildlife sanctuary was a place where nature would develop or could be developed. We were interested in developing natural things outdoors and how important this was, that this was worth saving, this open space.

LL: Now, did this go around or in your farm? Your farm was in here meanwhile?

FN: No, this was off...

LL: Separate from your farm?

FN: This was separate from my farm, across the road from my farm. This was a walking trail that I developed.

LL: Who owned the land?

FN: The town of South Windsor owned the land. If we and some others hadn't pushed this program along, we feel that this would've been just – it would've been turned to homes or maybe some businesses and things like that, but we kept pushing this program [Unintelligible] emphasized for open space and it would stay that way. That's why the wildlife sanctuary...

LL: Is still there.

FN: It's still there. I mean [Unintelligible] something out of this area, the South Windsor sanctuary. It was a sanctuary. [Unintelligible] a sanctuary.

LL: It's something safe, where the wildlife would be safe, protected.

FN: That's right, and people would have the opportunity to enjoy it without interruption. We had some difficult times making this thing that was [Unintelligible]. The wildlife sanctuary became a leader in saving open space and also open space that was limited to walking only. There would be no motorcycles or other vehicles that could be used there. It has a parking area for that and it has a [Unintelligible] South Windsor decided they want to have an outdoor activity. They came and we worked together on that and I was [Unintelligible].

LL: That's good. Did it ever get political? Did politics...

FN: No politics, but in the first place, I was an independent as far as that's concerned, and the town just appreciated – some of the people and the townsfolk saw it like this. Majority of them agreed with what I wanted to do there and I got their support in keeping an open space in South Windsor [Unintelligible] of the South Windsor Wildlife Sanctuary.

LL: Can we get back to where I got off, the area about your neighbours? You were talking about your neighbours while you were farming. Did you all help each other with your crops? Who were your neighbours? Had they been there a long time?

FN: Yes. I know it has to be publicized on there, but I think that I just went to enough meetings and conferences in South Windsor through the governing body [Unintelligible] the town of South Windsor. [Unintelligible] agreed that the...

LL: That the land would be set aside.

FN: Yes, that the land would be set aside for open space and we wanted to [Unintelligible] I think because I always felt interested in – that we should keep some place open in South Windsor, and there wouldn't be – I was sitting on the [Unintelligible] on development, and I want to explain something here. I'm not against people building houses and I'm not against people that are wanting to live in individual homes, but there also has to be a move for some place where there isn't any [Unintelligible] open space by people that wanted to go [Unintelligible] and things like that. So I was able to get some people to understand what we wanted, what I wanted to do, and that [Unintelligible] at that time.

LL: Had the land already been donated to the town?

FN: The town [Unintelligible] is something like that. I have pictures about it and tell you what happened there but this situation there is when in the [Unintelligible] where they're able to use the [Unintelligible] hanging them down or something like that. They decided that – I'm not sure of what year that was, that there was – they moved it.

LL: Can you tell me...?

FN: Maybe I'm not very [Unintelligible]. I never made and I sat down and told this story of what happened in the wildlife sanctuary. That's what this [Unintelligible], once we got that going and they're circling around, he had this [Unintelligible] fast enough to have them be – have the people in South Windsor. [Side conversation] We did run into some roadblocks and we said there would be no dogs. I want the kind of wildlife sanctuary for people who were walking their dogs, walking without their arms on and not leashing their dogs. That they would run off [Unintelligible] we eliminated that group of people that want to come with their dogs, and we had some Huskies that these people are [Unintelligible]. They wanted to take their dogs to the most wonderful place the dog. [Unintelligible]. They were on through the original 110 acres of – on the original acres, there was 45 acres under the Skinner property, and I went to school with a family of – the Skinner family. They were so happy that they needed to be just a place for walking and not for taking the dog for a walk, and that's kind of [Unintelligible] place to walk their dog, they should go back down to South Windsor and find a place in there to be a place to walk their dog. How come you get them [Unintelligible], the thing that you'll put this back to me and [Unintelligible]. Time-wise, I can't give you the date there on when [Unintelligible]. Is it in there, the date of it?

LL: No. This doesn't say. This? No, there's no date on it.

FN: So, we had a [Unintelligible] fallen and turned over new soil to be sure that this wildlife sanctuary would be the [Unintelligible] come for a second.

LL: Can we go back to your own farm for a little bit now? Let's moved back. You milked cows by hand?

FN: At first, yes. We really [Unintelligible] yes.

LL: You had no electricity when you started?

FN: No, electricity came in 1938.

LL: 1938, electricity came?

FN: Yes, and now this was the year that that [Unintelligible] had a program [Unintelligible] out of the [Audio Gap].

LL: [Unintelligible] electricity?

FN: Yes. The [Unintelligible] electricity. We had electricity and [Unintelligible]. I just had the town meetings and worked with the right people and found out that they were getting support from the [Unintelligible].

LL: For electricity or the roads?

FN: It was always – she was not working on the property. There's no lost cause in there, no [rack], no vehicles that were all on the property.

LL: Now, we're talking about the town roads that came out to your farm. We're talking about electricity that came to your farm because you used to milk by hand.

FN: That's right.

LL: Did you have to buy your own poles when electricity came out?

FN: No. When my dad pursued the opportunity to get the...

LL: Electricity?

FN: Electricity, yes, up to the area where we wanted to – it was just across the road from that parked area where it was just across the road from my house. I was, myself, acquainted [Unintelligible], in that I took care of it – and I had the backing of town council and the [Unintelligible] after like this [Unintelligible] the people would like to come out there, bring their dogs out there too.

LL: This would've been in the 1960s or '70s?

FN: Yes.

LL: Go back a little bit further, back to the 30s when you didn't have electricity. Did you have electricity in the barn before you had in the house?

FN: No. When electricity didn't get up to our house. We were connected between [Dunhill] Road and it's in that road – the Ellington Road. I like that there was a [Unintelligible].

LL: Did the power company come out to you with offers or did you have to pursue them?

FN: We had to pursue them for the [Unintelligible]. This [Unintelligible] wildlife sanctuary where there was this familiar client [Unintelligible] and they were there.

LL: How old were you when you got married?

FN: How old was I when I got married? I don't know. I was a [Unintelligible].

LL: [Laughter] You were a bachelor for a long time?

FN: Yes. My wife passed away [Unintelligible].

LL: Had she lived on the farm?

FN: Yes.

LL: How did you meet her? Do you remember?

FN: She was – I was also [Unintelligible] Saturday night to actually [Unintelligible] before but somehow I don't how I got the connection over there. I would go through the Saturday night dances and dance with her and enjoy the feeling of [Unintelligible]. We've got to have something, and as I make sure that there people [Unintelligible] they wanted to walk, they wanted to come here to take their dogs for a walk and [Unintelligible] and make sure I had had no [Unintelligible] about it. It was very difficult [Unintelligible] long time but it truly [Unintelligible]. The handles we had on this [Unintelligible].

LL: So, you went to the dance and didn't dance but you met your wife there? Is that The Grange?

FN: This was very - yes. We hung over there [Unintelligible] in The Grange. We used to have Saturday night dances there in my day, and I would [Unintelligible].

LL: Even though you had never danced before?

FN: No. [Unintelligible] I guess I can get a little possessive about the girl I met there, I mean [Unintelligible]. So, if I had to see that over [Unintelligible], we had nobody else took the opportunity that I had. [Unintelligible] and things like that.

LL: So, you eventually married her?

FN: Yes, [Unintelligible].

LL: How long were you married? You had children?

FN: I had children. My daughter-in-law is always here with the family and she just reminded me that over 50 years ago that she was born. I said to her [Unintelligible] half a century [Unintelligible].

LL: You'll be 87 next Monday?

FN: Yes.

LL: You were in your 30s when she was born?

FN: Yes.

LL: Did your children stay on the farm?

FN: They wouldn't. No. They don't need to. She would stay on the front, it hadn't been used [Unintelligible] it should be used but the notion of a wildlife sanctuary or anything like that, and so on and so forth that -

LL: Is your own farm going to be put into a sanctuary?

FN: No. They're in the process – this is something that [Unintelligible] and I don't like that. I had to deal without any new part when I had to do anything. I had to [Unintelligible].

LL: The town council?

FN: Yes.

LL: You said there's something that wasn't going to happen and yet you...?

FN: I went to the town council and continually asked them for assistance [Unintelligible] in how important that would be for about a hundred and something acres [Unintelligible] to bring another 40 acres added to the original property which were 40 acres that was known as the Skinner Property, and I just used that as a talking point that nature of that that I was talking about. It set the whole piece of property there which was about 140 acres to get through now [Unintelligible] the wildlife sanctuary, and then talking to the town council dedicated to that piece of property where we have another [Unintelligible] to the wildlife sanctuary.

LL: What's happened to the rest of the property around it? Do you know what happened to the rest of the land around the sanctuary?

FN: Well, some of it, they were at home. Some enjoyed their home [Unintelligible] like that. But the biggest push that we got that [Unintelligible] until the town council realized that they weren't going to head down [Unintelligible] developed that with developing the area that [Unintelligible].

LL: As you farmed...?

FN: I just talked my comments why [Unintelligible].

LL: That's okay. Yes. We're sitting in front of a large window looking out at the fall colors and then the driveway. As you farmed, what was the thing you enjoyed the most about farming?

FN: Well, it was working with the outdoors, with nature, the outdoors, seeing that this could be protected somehow or another into a town legislation, or a town dedication, or something like that. Because I had been so active in this state, I dedicated the South Windsor – the line of the South Windsor to be – and it would be dedicated to the South Windsor Wildlife Sanctuary, dedicated to my wife and I. Maybe [Unintelligible] or anything like that, get this set aside in the wildlife sanctuary. The wildlife sanctuary, you're going to have your home there one minute and the next minute, it won't be in our home or something like that. There were thousands of that on a piece of property. The value of that property is [Unintelligible] would be sort of increasing that [Unintelligible].

LL: Your own farm is across the street, across the road from the sanctuary. What will happen to that? Is it in any kind of a land preservation ?

FN: Yes, it is.

LL: Your own farm?

FN: I had sold them my own farm and the people that bought it, I mean like I needed some money and, of course, I took the opportunity to have funds that would be available, I mean to increase the property or the state of the property that [Unintelligible], and I was encouraged and sort of [Unintelligible] to pursue this and they did once the town bought the land for open spaces, and then they had that [Unintelligible] drop there and they had done something like that. But, it's the only thing that they had done there and they [Unintelligible] and this isn't quite right, and that this [Unintelligible] that the land was donated by [Unintelligible] and that's quite right but I hadn't argued at that point. Well, I guess I have to [Unintelligible] about this process but [Unintelligible] out here.

LL: Is there anything that you would like to mention about the sanctuary or your own farm? We've been talking for quite a while.

FN: Keeping that [Unintelligible] so I guess that this is, and this reminded me that they had dedicated their land to open space like that, and I know this [Unintelligible] established now and the timing along with that and they furnished it, people that need [Unintelligible], and they bought – they furnished with money [Unintelligible] paid for the development of [Unintelligible] establishment of like that. I think you're [Unintelligible] time and money I spent on this [Unintelligible] but it was [Unintelligible] they I manage it and I had a [Unintelligible] at a time but maybe actually I have tracked [Unintelligible] and I knew this wouldn't act – if [Unintelligible] and that is accepted [Unintelligible] out of the open space area on [Unintelligible]. I kind of mumble along here and I don't know if -

LL: That's okay. You're doing fine. We've been talking for a little bit over an hour and I think we need to stop. You've been very good. You've given a lot of information. So, I want to thank you very much.

FN: I appreciate the opportunity and I know that somebody would put the - I mumble - I rambled along [Unintelligible] knows anything on this or something like that, and that's how this property was established or something like that.

LL: I have one other question. Do you remember any weather problems you had when you were farming? Did you farm during the hurricanes or the floods?

FN: Well, hurricane...

LL: In Windsor. Yes.

FN: Yes, we had hurricanes. We were [Unintelligible] about the early autumn season or something like that. [Unintelligible] the hurricanes [Unintelligible] but I don't want to be like that. Unfortunately, there was a large - a lot of large trees on that property and they would good - having it [Unintelligible] in this property to try it like that. There were some trees that [Unintelligible] we established areas and [Unintelligible] we like to have it established as a nature area, otherwise that [Unintelligible] a nature area. It would be one, they're going to take dogs because that could be a [Unintelligible] positive but [Unintelligible] in town but this is not a place for your dog if they're on the property that you have with dogs.

LL: At the wildlife, they're not leashed.

FN: They're not. Well, then we got them with their dog, and people would just take their dogs out there and [Unintelligible] established we walked through them and then they know it's a good one, and they should know other stuff [Unintelligible] for the area like that. And, it pretty soon became pretty well-established and participated, that we have one piece of land that we bought. I don't know how many acres it is but [Unintelligible].

LL: There's an article here too about...

FN: What about that?

LL: About the antenna that you bought on your property.

FN: Oh, that. Yes, and they wanted to - we wanted to leave it as much as nature as possible. So what did they do about it?

LL: It says here that you had 16 acres donated by you and the Hartford Audubon Society operates it. Then, across the road is 70 acres that the town bought in 1968 that was dedicated to you later for your work on it.

FN: Yes. I always wondered about this dedication. This may not mean much and I think it did. I think you can realize that what I wanted was to have a place where they could go and...

LL: It doesn't say how the antenna. Was there ever an antenna put on the property by FNET?

FN: No.

LL: Then, you must've fought it successfully, This was in 1983. In 1983 was the antenna. In 1968 was the time that the sanctuary was started.

FN: Yes, it takes time. It takes time and perseverance or whatever you call it. I mean I can't speak to it [Unintelligible].

LL: Your 16 acres is by the agricultural center. That's the other 16 acres?

FN: No, that -

LL: Education center, oh. This is from the Hartford Courant. [Pause] Well, you've done a lot of wonderful things for this community and I thank you very much for taking the time. I'm going to shut this down [Unintelligible].

FN: Well, I think.

LL: You were going to add something?

FN: I just wanted to say that I appreciate the opportunity to do your interview. I rambled through some of the thoughts and ideas that have come to fruition, and I hope I used that word right, "fruition." I don't know what the word say in the dictionary was. For me, fruition means it came to a successful conclusion. And that I wish I would [Unintelligible] do something there. I always hesitate to have some people work on it. I mean, [Unintelligible] so, I always had that [Unintelligible] under control. This is probably a pretty selfish idea around that nobody else can do it but they have come around to it. It has to be for advice now and also what has to be done over there but I still go on as long I can drive my little tractor and mower and the motor fails out or anything like that, I would like the opportunity to do that and keep it under control. The South Windsor Advisory Committee, and then these open spaces [Unintelligible]. There are a lot of people that would have liked to just bought and you can't have people walking and people walking there with their dogs, controlling their destination. So, we've got to [Unintelligible] sometimes there was wait and see in there. I'm now looking at my brothers [Unintelligible] out of here and [Unintelligible] and whatever's going to happen to that place. Of course, money is still [Unintelligible] and then thoughts of many people or anything like that, and if I got [Unintelligible] sold for a hotspot or something like that, that would override [Unintelligible] that little piece of land connected to another piece of land and another piece of land to make up for a large parcel of land.

LL: You really love the land. Even during your farming years, it was the love of the land?

FN: Yes and the conservation we went – it was – people aren't going to work on the land or anything like that that works on the land. It's a long story. I just know what you're saying [Unintelligible] I appreciate it there [Unintelligible] come out here and listening to my ramblings about what's going on. What's the day today? Sunday?

LL: No, today is Tuesday. No, I think it's a Wednesday. It's a Wednesday. I have the wrong day. Well, thank you very, very much.

(End of Interview)