

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

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Name of Person Interviewed: Preston Roberts, Agricultural Producer
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LL: This is March 29, 2000. This is Luane Lange interviewing Preston Roberts in the Brooklyn Cooperative Extension office. Preston was an animal science, dairy field person, Agent. When did you retire?

PR: 1985.

LL: Can you talk about.. where did you go to school?

PR: At the University of New Hampshire and later I went to Cornell.

LL: And what was your major, at New Hampshire?

PR: Dairy Husbandry and at Cornell it was Farm Management.

LL: And had you come from a family of fanners?

PR: Oh, yea a small farm. We always participated in 4H and things like that out in the country.
Laughs.

LL: When did you know that you would pursue agriculture? What do you think made you consider this as a career?

PR: I kind of liked it and the other two took it and decided that my brother went into dairy husbandry and became a contractor, laughs, but I went and became a fanning agent.

LL: When did you come to CT?

PR: I came her in 1954. I had been at Cornell, at Watertown NY and Jefferson County for S ½ years as County Agent. That's where I had the teachings of real old county agent from 1932 on. He figured you ought to see every farmer once a year. Laughs. That do esn' t happen any more. Laughs.

LL: So, his time in his county .. did he visit every farmer?

PR: That' s what he tried to do.

LL: And so there were several of you in that county.

PR: There were three of us and there were close to three thousand farmers. That was a lot of visits.

LL: What kind of information did you take out there?

PR: Well it used to be that you got involved in , you took soil tests and a calf being born. We not only talked about things, but we helped them.

LL: How big were these farms? Either in herd siz e or in acreage.?

PR: I remember I was telling why that farmers in Jefferson County were so successful. They averaged twenty-two cows. Laughs.

LL: Laughs. I have a, 1930 map from CT and it shows the size of the dairy herd. They had four categories and I think that the smallest number was 1-3 cows, and the most was twenty cows and over.

PR: Well if you look at some of the old records from around here, every dairy farm had the apple orchards, with a few trees, garden and some hens. It was a general farm in many ways.

LL: When you came here how many dairy cattle would you say there were in the herds?

PR: Well the list had fourteen hundred members which soon boiled down, between having to have the bulk tanks and it was about 500 before the- - - -

LL: So when you came how did they market their milk?

PR:... Well, Hood' s was a big buyer. And you had your co-ops. Those were the two major... there were some local dairies that bought, too.

LL: And did they still use cans at that time? When did, when did the bulk tank come in?

PR: I think they came in ' 56 or ' 57, somewhere in there. I remember I had a meeting on bulk tanks down at Willimantic . It was a big crowd of farmers that came to see these bulk tanks because most of them had not purchased one. They were looking to see what they had to do. That was a point where some of the small farms decided that they were going to raise young stock or something else because the bulk tank was too expensive.

LL: In order to have a bulk tank did they had to have a different kind of structure, in which to hold it and then refrigeration changes?

PR: Well the tank itself, they had to have a milk room that could hold it, but there were various types, tank, coolers and \$3000 and things like that. That was a lot of money , then. Now you see big bulk tanks.

Paul Miller up at Woodstock he has a, one of the various trailer trucks come and they fill that up for the day so it gets to be a big thing that comes from many of his farms

LL: How big is his producing herd?

PR: Uh, he 's got 400 now. That 's not really big . Bass brothers, I think there is 600.

LL: Where are they?

PR: Scotland. It' s like the poultry business, except that it isn't quite as quickly done. There used to be 1000 poultry farms and now there are six fairly good ones. The concentration and the cost of feed, delivery and so forth have made a lot of changes.

LL: Where do they get their supplies? I know they used to come in by railroad car and they had the cooperatives handle it from there on.

PR: Well, they still have a lot of bulk tank deliveries.

LL: And they come from..

PR: In central CT, it's one of the major deliveries.

LL: Oh.

PR: And then there is a poultry outfit down New London that provides a lot and people like Koffkoff, they have their own mills.

LL: Now when you were here, did you specialize in dairy or did you do other kinds..

PR: Well the first fifteen years, I always thought that dairy was it, for the major part, but I had fruit and vegetables and Don Francis had poultry. We kept swapping back and forth. Don would have fruit and I would have vegetables. What that usually meant was that we went out with the Specialists on that subject, maybe once a month, but with the dairy he had...I had two groups there in the county, Woodstock Young Farmers and Plainfield Young Farmers. We called them "Young Farmers," but there were some grandfathers!

LL: Laughs.

PR: Laughs. .During the winter we'd have lots of meetings, and they'd get to know each other pretty well. And then later, when Don became the County Administrator and I became the Regional Agent in Brooklyn and New London. I used to have dinner meetings and we would have some say, October through May. We had a pretty good turnout. Everybody liked to eat. Laughs.

LL: Laughs.

PR: We would have Specialists come in and talk on some subject. That was a main emphasis on the programs. Of course I did a lot off and fairs. For awhile there it was freestall housing. It was changing over from conventional expansion barns to freestall barns. First there was loose housing and then it was free stall housing.

LL: Would you describe the difference between loose and free stall?

PR: Well, loose-stall housing, did not have any free stall. They just had a better path in there.

LL: So that was just, they could mill around in an area.

PR: Yes. It took too much bedding and they went to free stalls and had .. that was as narrowly tipped in the method of housing cattle.

LL: How does freestall differ from the stanchions?

PR: They are not hitched. They can go in and out. With stanchions, they' re lo cked in place.

LL: So, in free stall they have a place but they are not hooked into it.

PR: No .

LL: I see.

PR: I guess you wouldn't find many free stall houses now

LL: I remember visiting my cousin's dairy barn. It was a general farming and each cow knew where its stanchion was.

PR: Yep. I think some of the free stall cows know where their stall is.

LL: They go to the same place?

PR: Yea. But they made changes, now they have mattresses at their stalls

LL: Really?

PR: They use automated systems to put the bedding down, and scraped the barn with rubber tires. That's smart as well. The other system is anyone uh, wheel barrows, and shovels in the gutter and so forth. There have been a lot of changes.

LL: What do you remember, because I have seen you in pictures of you out at work . .what do you remember about the farm life? I know it was labor intensive. What you've just described is the way to do more with less labor and less people. But what do you remember of the farms?

PR: Well, I did a lot of haying with hay wagons and now a good share of the farms put up a choppers and free top and silos.

LL: So they don't do their own hay?

PR: Oh yes. Most of um do. But they don't, haying isn't a big project compared to what it used to be. Well, it started with com choppers and _

LL: They do it right out in the field, rather than stacking. And then the take it into .. they don't use silos?

PR: Well they have the silos, but they don't show as much because most of them are trench style. The

horizontal silos are... a lot of them hold many tons compared to an upright silo. The first ones, the wooden ones, they held 150 tons. Now most of them have these horizontal silos and bunker silos and they hold 1000 tons. They have become quite good at packing them, putting plastic and tires on them and so forth.

LL: When you see some of these, they are not encased in any kind of a foundation. Some of them are, but some of them are just mounds, huge mounds.

PR: Yes. Stack silos, they are all right, but that I think many farmers feel it's quite a little waste of silage inside of it, and confined in . I suppose as big as a stack is, the percentage lost is small.

LL: Uh huh.

PR: It's still not as big as the one with walls on it.

LL: What do you remember about... you said that you had had these meetings through the winter and the farmers got to know each other. Where there any other organizations that brought the farmers together?

PR: Well, the milk market and co-ops, and the various meeting of the Farm Bureau. Some farmers would seem to have something for every night. Laughs.

LL: Uhhuh.

PR: I think some of them still do, you know in between the co-ops many of them become interested in town planning and zoning and that. We had a pretty active group. I think you would find, for the most part, farmers took an active part in, not only co-ops, but the community. They feel a part of it.

LL: When you first started with Extension, who provided the labor on the farms .. and did that change?

PR: Well it used to be their sons, there were a lot of partnerships, father and son partnerships, even two brothers or four and someone might die. One of the big jobs is keeping help on the farm and some musical chairs, it keeps changing.

LL: The farms that no longer farm, is it that they didn't get bigger, they either stayed the same but for different use... what happened to the farms that didn't get bigger?

PR: Well, one of the things that has happened is real estate development. The realtors have been willing to buy land and they make a lot of money on them usually. And the other thing is that we have a program of development rights," Public Act 490.

LL: Uh huh.

PR: That has helped a lot to keep some of the land acreage in agriculture. They have the price of farm use and the development rights are sold to/owned by the State. We went to a farm down in New London town the past week, it was part of an open house. He has five hundred acres and the purchase rights and the development were bought by the State. He said he couldn't afford to farm, even using that avenue "Yesterday somebody sold me their rights, so they could put in a new milking parlor."

LL : Uh huh.

PR: various reasons, usually it's economic.

LL: Now, in some states, their development rights are only for a certain length of time. In this state, they are forever.

PR: If you change your mind in the first ten years you have to pay back proportionally on the rights. If they lasted ten years, they'll probably keep on going, if it's large farming in good spots. I think if you had six or seven hundred acres of land that's in development rights you couldn't afford to buy that land probably as you know, you have to pay the full price.

LL: Only if someone new has bought it. Has it already been in development rights and then someone new bought it?

PR: It's quite often that in the process of going out of business they will sell the development rights so that somebody can afford to buy it. If its previous owner had a love for agriculture they would try to sell the development rights so that you would see it in farming. Communities are beginning to feel that it's important to carry some of the land over. They don't want to see housing everywhere. A few farms, quite a few farms have been sold to developments. They've changed the character of the community. They've mentioned that when somebody is farming on one side of the road and they put a development across the road, suddenly the neighbors realize that there are things that go along with farming, like spreading manure and so forth that, " Geez we didn't want that." So its part of the story.

LL: What did you enjoy most about your life as an Extension Agent?

PR: I think with the different farmers and being within the different areas, it was a friendly atmosphere. I don't recall too many that would live in it. Laughs.

LL: Uh huh, laughs. Don Francis told me that it was hard to get the trust sometimes, of new immigration patterns. They were kind of worried about government.

PR I think that I would go back to some of the early people. I remember one man who . . he had two sons who were working with him. I said , "You know if he maybe had a limited partnership or something, that way _____. He got real excited and he said, " By God don't talk to me about giving away any of my land." Laughs. You know, that was it as far as he was concerned. I think nowadays they realize that if they want the family on the farm, they should try to seek ways for them become partners.

LL: Right. So if you had to describe some of your days in your work, what were they like?

PR: Um, they weren't eight hour days. Laughs. Quite often we had meetings at night and we got into such things as community development, as well as the dairy industry. Then, of course we would go to the university to get updated pretty regularly. It was a lot, probably either three or four meetings a week.

LL: Weekends, too?

PR: Not, not too much weekends.

LL: That was 4H. Laughs.

PR: Saturdays were always part of the week and Sunday was free. Laughs.

LL: What do you think were some of the greatest changes in the kinds of things that you taught? You mentioned the kinds of silage. What other kinds of things, did you keep them updated on?

PR: Well I think that the biggest change for the period of time that I was in it was the change in animal housing and the size of farms. People, they were always busy getting the rocks off their fields and trying to tier them. After a while, they started taking walls out and the tiers got bigger.

LL: Now did that have to do with the equipment, because they needed bigger pieces of equipment and couldn't maneuver in the smaller fields

PR: Yea and they bought bigger equipment to take the walls out and .. laughs.

LL: Laughs.

PR: The cost of machinery was dramatic because they get bigger stuff and then more stuff, bulk tanks.

LL: Did they share machinery between farms?

PR: Very little. They would hire a bulldozer. And, there had been some custom operators who did the chopping for maybe seven or eight and that cut the cost for those farms. They made a full-time business. There is still a few of those.

LL: Uh huh. Like where are they located? Do the people have their own farms and their custom work, too, or do they farm full-time and fit... ?

PR: Most of them, full-time, some of them have half-time.

LL: What were some of the key problems that you saw farmers facing.

PR: Well, probably the milk market, as far as dairy was concerned. It's been that the price of milk has dropped and that everything else has gone up. And this is the economic crunch. I think there are a lot of farmers, if they look back they would see what a good price they had once, compared to now. It's part of a rat race to keep up with the cost of production and the price of milk.

LL: Did any of them have off-farm income? Or, you mentioned some of them had orchards so they balanced maybe some of their seasonal things. In some parts of the state farms are near towns and they can work off-farm or their wives work off-farm. Do you see it in this part of New London County?

PR: Oh I think that many of the wives were secretaries and they worked off the farm and the farmers, some of them worked for the state and different things. Fanning is a pretty full-time job for them, particularly as the farms get larger.

LL: How many farms?

PR: My guess is that it's somewhere around seventy-five or eighty. I haven't seen the latest figures.

LL: Out of the seventy-five or eighty that are producing, are there many because this part of the state is starting to develop, more. I have seen some information that up in the Woodstock area, they are trying to preserve agriculture. Like in Lebanon, they are trying to create a rural/agriculture sense. But do you see anyone moving to small parcels of land to maintain kind of an agricultural lifestyle? Just because that's the way they want to live.

PR: Uh, I think they are more leaving these small plots and coming from... They sell off a little more to the family or somebody and put another house on the lot and so forth. I don't think that there is too

many in that category. There are a few greenhouses, garden centers, but otherwise housing or larger farms.

LL: When Route 395 was built, were you here at that time?

PR: Yes.

LL: What happened with the farms as the new highway came?

PR: I don't think it made too much difference except some of the farmers they would.

LL: Farmers that worked off the farm, like at electric boat?

PR: It was easier to get there. So they, there was a tendency for more commuting, better jobs. Some members of the family who decided that farming wasn't the way they went out and got a higher education.

LL: How was the land taken to build that highway? Was there any land speculation? It must have taken some farm land.

PR: Um, it seems that a lot of it went through the woods. Laughs.

LL: Okay.

PR: There was some, there was some that went through fields. A lot of woods involved and probably the choices for the most part were attracted to the woodland they just sold them.

LL: You mentioned the rocks, the stones. I have just been reading Bell's book about the geology of the state, try to get a feel for it, you know what the glaciers did to us and where the fertile places were. They mentioned the central valley area, but they also mentioned North Eastern CT. They are over at a lot of farms, here.

PR: But most of em are well-endowed with rocks. Laughs.

LL: Laughs. Well-endowed. Were they, what someone referred to in another part of the state, "hard scrapple farm?"

PR: Hard scrapple?

LL: Yea.

PR: I remember one farmer said, "I got four fields, one is for rocks." Laughs

LL: Laughs. Exactly. Now the Civil Conservation Corps came up in this part of the state in the 30s and 40s. Did you ever hear anyone talking about that?

PR: No.

LL: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced being in Agricultural Agent? PR: Well I suppose trying to serve the clientele was the biggest job. To keep on top of things. I'd be a little disappointed if we were talking about something that wasn't up to date.

LL: When you came, in 1954, was that just before the Farm Bureau and Extension had to part ways?

PR: Right. We had meetings on it and so forth and set up an Extension Council. and things like that . I remember when I was in New York State, one of the big functions of the County Agent was the membership drive. That was a major item for the last year.

LL: I found something in a 1940's Farm Bureau Bulletin about rural electrification in Killingly I think it was Killingly that was putting together an advisory board to bring electricity to that area. I know this is before your time too, but the area must not have been very developed.

PR: It was developed at REA (Rural Electrification Administration) and so forth and I remember in New Hampshire, it brought electricity to some areas that hadn't had it. They had committees and so forth.

LL: I was referred by Al Gray to find Betsy Stiles. Her husband had worked for the power company. She found records that CT was one of three states that never took any federal money, did it all on its own.

PR: Yea.

LL: That's a whole story in itself, you know, the Yankee home rule kind of thing .. laughs.

PR: Laughs.

LL: Was there much difference between fanning in CT and NY?

PR: Well the farming in NY, you had a lot more acres and more room, quite a bit bigger. And, they were used less intensively.

LL: Uh huh

PR: I remember one thing that hadn't occurred. They had an aversion to using paint on their barns. Laughs. There were a lot of nice farmers that used to do a pretty good job, but they had more land and resources.

LL: Uh huh. How did you get to come to CT?

PR: My wife lived in NY City and I lived in NH and we figured that CT was closer than Watertown NY, which was quite a ways out there. Laughs.

LL: How did you meet?

PR: Well, her brother-in-law was a minister in the church across the street from where I stayed. And he kind of laughs.

LL: Was she involved in agriculture?

PR: No, she was pretty much a homemaker .

LL: Uh huh. What did she think of your hours as an Extension Agent?

PR: Well, I don't think she was completely happy with em. Laughs. I think there were times when I

probably should have been home with the kids.

LL: What do you think was your greatest frustration? Did you have any frustrations? PR: Laughs. Once in awhile you would have a meeting and not many would come and that would be a disappointment. For the most part I think that we did pretty well.

LL: Uh huh. What about budgeting?

PR: I think that actually we were supported pretty well the years that I worked. Sometimes I think towards the end of it, we were getting short of help for the most part.

LL: What kind of reporting did you have?

PR: We had the annual reports and report.

LL: Was it different when it was part of the Farm Bureau than when it was on its own. PR: Well, we used to report to the Farm Bureau Directors. I remember that more in NY state and I remember when a fella on the committee said, "What's a good farm hand getting now days?" Laughs. He was talking about the pay raises.

LL: Oh. Laughs.

PR: They were, they were involved. We would meet with the County Commissioners. They usually had a part in saying how much the budget was. I think it wasn't quite as important. I don't remember that it caused us too much grief Usually they did the best they could for us LL: Not too many people talked about this, but with the County structure gone, then the County identification changed. Did people think more about their own towns than regionally. Do you think that happened?

PR: We got to work with the new Regional Districts and so forth. There was quite a lot of emphasis on that.

LL: So you went from being in this County (Wind ham) to also including New London County in your work?

PR: Yes. Well that was part of it. When Ken Hanson was administrator we figured a way to have a County Administrator in each county. He would also work on Community Development

LL: Uh huh

PR: Where Don Francis, Gary Zimmerman and Russ Hibbard. He used to be the Dairy Agent in New London.

LL: Oh I see.

PR: He had a good following of in two counties so it meant that I wasn't stepping into a vacuum.

LL: Are many dairy farms in New London? I'm thinking of Wychewood Farm down in Stonington, which is no longer used and is sitting there empty. Are there other's like that?

PR: Well I think you could find that in both counties the land prices are a little higher but there are still some nice farms there. In the last fifteen years I guess probably some of them disappeared. I was just

looking at this list and there are still quite a few farms around.

LL: Uh huh. Is there anything else you would like to talk about? Did you travel much out of state?

PR: Well, laughs, we went on Jeff Nyes's dairy tours and then after awhile when he'd give me one group of them. We went to Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia .. we had quite a few tours. In fact I got an invitation, and they're still running them

LL: Is Jeff Nigh still doing this?

PR: Well his name is on the list, but I think it's his secretary, Delores Rills.

LL: Interesting. Now his daughter and son went out to Utah?

PR: Yes. I get occasional updates on that from Herb Weingarten. He used to be a fanner in New London County, that 's Maria's father' s. Jeff is still out there and his sons I think got 1000 cows. They don't raise crops, they buy them all.

LL: Did he take part of the herd with him when he left.

PR: Yes.

LL: He shipped it out.

PR: That was probably a small portion of what he has now. The farm that we visited last week, he just bought a herd in Woodstock and took the whole thing, one hundred cows.

LL: What kind of financial investment is that?

PR: Ten to twelve hundred, probably some of them.

LL: Percow?

PR: Yes.

LL: You sound like you are still active in certain kinds of things .

PR: Yea, I .. after I retired I built my house and then I went to work for twelve years at O'Leary' s.

'LL: Oh yes, okay.

PR : I was more or less full time until about two years ago.

LL: As farm manager?

PR: No, no. I just ... Ernie was running the farm.

LL: Oh, oh all right.

PR: But I kept busy.

LL: I guess so, sure.

PR: Now, I only work on Sundays. Laughs. Help with any wagon and use the rubber tire scraper and so forth. I think they have one full-time mechanic. A lot of things that have to be kept going. The son-in-law is off the farm. During the week he works for Pfyzer . He is well up the ranks. The daughter has a nursery and strawberry business, quite a busy farm.

LL: So, this is kind of an example of the kinds of farms that have evolved now?

PR: Yes, not too many. Probably things exist but there are some. I guess one of the large apple orchards down in Plainfield, its blueberries now..

LL: As children leave the farm, who stays and who goes. It's pretty individual, though. They have family. You talk about the passing on of the land, that must be difficult if you have three sons, what do you do?

PR: Yea. I think John Malodic's family is quite an interesting one. The boys are there and some of them pulled back and one of urn runs it. They are all there. The family gets bigger.

LL: Where is that one?

PR : That's down on Ekonk Hill. I used to visit the Mars Farm in Scotland quite a bit. They had it out with four brothers and one of um, he was left the business. Since then I understand that just one of the sons was the chief "hancho." It was a good size farm.

LL: Are there any other things you would like to talk about that you remember from your time as an Extension Agent?

PR: Oh, I think we had a lot of enjoyable meetings. There are some people who came to eat, I think! I remember one fella , he would make it to the meetings but he didn' t hear much at the meetings.

LL: Oh, laughs.

PR: Laughs.

LL: I've found that a lot of people rely on magazines and the supplier's journals and brochures and so on to keep updated.

PR: Yea, good things like B ... Dairyman, (Floyds) and so forth. They give um ideas. I think as a whole, farmers liked to go out to see somebody else's farms. They've been talking about extracting water out of the manure so it doesn't bulk up so much.

LL: Oh.

PR: So that was the reason for the visit. This man had an extractor, and farmers came down to see it. Each one of these things cost money. I think that one was, his whole set up was, \$60,000.

LL: \$60,000?

PR: Yes. That's what you used to buy a farm for!

LL: Would someone else be able to bring their manure in and use the same extractor? Would he do it

as a business beside or just bring it to his own farm?

PR: Somebody said that some of it going on out in the Midwest where people would bring an extractor to the farm and pump um out the liquid and separate the solids. There is not enough of it going on.

LL: I'm going to turn this off as we look at your photographs Thank you very, very much for taking the time to do this. Um, when I come across some more of your pictures I will see about getting you some copies of these . Thank you very much.

(End of Interview)