

Flint Hills Ranching Impact Oral History Project, Phase I
Partially funded by the Kansas Humanities Council
White Interview, 24 January 2008, Final

1 **Interview conducted by Bill Smith; Recorded on Marantz Digital Recorder;**
2 **Transcribed by Bill Smith; Electronic copy of Transcription edited by John White;**
3 **name spelling corrections, only.**

4
5 **Track 74**

6
7 **Bill:** This is Bill Smith, I'm sitting with John White. We're working on the Flint Hills
8 Ranching Impact Oral History Project. We're sitting in John's office at Farmer's and
9 Drover's Bank in Council Grove, Morris County, Kansas. Let's begin with the
10 simplest... tell me your name, what year, and where you were born.

11
12 **John:** My name is John White. I was born on November 5th, 1945, on Coronado Island,
13 California.

14
15 **Bill:** So you are not a born native of...

16
17 **John:** Well, I would have, but for World War II. Dad was in the Navy and stationed on
18 Coronado.

19
20 **Bill:** How long has your family been in Morris County?

21
22 **John:** My great-great grandfather came in 1857.

23
24 **Bill:** Right at the beginning.

25
26 **John:** Fairly early. They started in Kentucky, then moved to Missouri, and in 1857 came
27 to Morris County.

28
29 **Bill:** What was his name?

30
31 **John:** His name was Thomas White.

32
33 **Bill:** We've got Tom White, John White, Bill Smith – lot of complicated names.

34
35 **John:** Short names, yes.

36
37 **Bill:** Has the same ranch land been in the family all that time, or were they moving
38 around?

39
40 **John:** Part of it is left. The original homestead, most of it is covered by the Council
41 Grove Reservoir now. But there is about 80 acres that was higher grass land and that we
42 still have.

43
44 **Bill:** Very good. What's your personal relationship? When did you come back and how
45 long have you been...

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46

47 **John:** I grew up in Council Grove, and I started full time in the bank when I finished
48 with college in 1970.

49

50 **Bill:** Did you work on the ranch then, as a youngster?

51

52 **John:** Yes, I did. And that started several years before.

53

54 **Bill:** Right. Tell me about live on the ranch a little bit, as a youngster.

55

56 **John:** I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy it. Riding horses, and being in the Flint Hills, is just
57 a lot of fun.

58

59 **Bill:** One of the things I've found fascinating about the Flint Hills is it seems that
60 practically every ranch, no matter how large or small has some farm land, and some
61 ranch land. Was that the case in yours?

62

63 **John:** Yes. It was probably 50-50, at the first. Later, there was more grass land than ag
64 land. In the beginning, I think, obviously, the farmer had to live off his ranch, so he had
65 to plant some crops for feed for cattle in the winter.

66

67 **Bill:** As you were growing up, what crops did you have?

68

69 **John:** The general, just corn, a lot of corn, in the fifties, I remember... some milo, and
70 alfalfa, brome hay and, of course, native prairie hay.

71

72 **Bill:** Did you raise your own cattle or bring cattle in to feed, or both, as you recall?

73

74 **John:** I think my great grand-dad started with a cow herd... or maybe, great-great grand-
75 dad... Hereford cows. By the time it reached me, we didn't have any cows; it was all
76 feeder cattle.

77

78 **Bill:** Again, that is something that has interested me was that some have one, some have
79 the other, and some have both.

80

81 **John:** The evolution.

82

83 **Bill:** Yes, the evolution over time... any particular memory of working with the cattle as
84 a youngster?

85

86 **John:** Oh I think my Shetland pony that could throw me off any time she wanted to!
87 [Laughter all around] She mastered full speed and a ninety degree turn and the saddle and
88 I both over the side.

89

90 **Bill:** Where did you go to college?

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91

92 **John:** I went to undergraduate at K-State and graduate at Law School at KU.

93

94 **Bill:** And then you came back over here, to the bank. Was your father in the bank?

95

96 **John:** Yes, Dad was in the bank. My great grand-dad started the bank.

97

98 **Bill:** And it has certainly been part of the history of Morris County.

99

100 **John:** It has been a lot of the history – started in 1882. He was the first President. He
101 basically founded it. It was a local bank, and it has stayed that way, as a local bank.

102

103 **Bill:** '82. Council Grove must have been an interesting town about that time?

104

105 **John:** It was just getting started. From the history I have read, the Santa Fe Trail reached
106 its peak in the 1850s, the late 1850s, then sort of dwindled down some, from there. My
107 great grand-dad started ... I've read and heard two things. One, the family story is, he
108 took commerce from Council Grove to Kansas City. He drove cattle or cattle needed to
109 be delivered. In the process of driving cattle, of course, he carried drafts or money or
110 commerce back and forth, too, and that emphasized the need for the bank; and that's
111 really how it got started.

112

113 **Bill:** Needed a fixed location, that local folks could use.

114

115 **John:** He also did, I think, some other cattle driving ... went to Western Kansas. And, I
116 read recently he drove wagon freighters on the Santa Fe Trail. He gave up on that
117 because of the Indians. [Laughter] I think this was before the treaty was signed... or all
118 the treaties were signed.

119

120 **Bill:** Even after the treaties were signed, I think there were some activities they didn't
121 like.

122

123 **John:** Still didn't like.

124

125 **Bill:** The basic thrust of our study is supposed to be how the Flint Hills are distinctive
126 with respect to other grazing or ranching lands. How has this affected the people and how
127 have the people on the land affected the Flint Hills? Do you have any particular thoughts
128 from your particular perspective, watching the growth over the years?

129

130 **John:** I think when I look at it, we're really lucky that our forefathers preserved the Flint
131 Hills. And I think, obviously, to my knowledge, there was never a movement or any
132 activity to do it, it was just inherently important to them to live upon the land and take
133 care of it. I think they realized that if they didn't take care of the Flint Hills and treat them
134 properly they weren't going to have anything. Most of the homesteads did till a few acres

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135 to provide food, food for the cattle and food for themselves. But, other than that, they
136 lived off of the pasture of the Flint Hills.

137

138 **Bill:** And that has proven to be very productive.

139

140 **John:** And has proven to be productive... and, at the same time, preserved the Flint Hills.
141 Bluestem is very forgiving up to a point, but you can't abuse it too much.

142

143 **Bill:** If you over graze, you have serious weed problems.

144

145 **John:** You have problems. That's right.

146

147 **Bill:** One of the interviews we talked about how you can drive down the road, and see
148 certain plant life that has come about because of over grazing.

149

150 **John:** Well, it is amazing how a fence line can keep out trees and other invaders.

151

152 **Bill:** Very interesting. What changes have you seen over your lifetime in the Flint Hills?

153

154 **John:** I think the early intensive grazing is the biggest change. When I first started, all of
155 the cattle were either cows or steers that were kept all summer; a five or six month
156 season, during the summer on grass. In the mid-seventies, with the research and
157 experimentation from K-State, Agronomy Department, I guess, Clenton Owensby,
158 primarily, Dr. Owensby, was really a forerunner in determining that Bluestem, for
159 grazing purposes, was going to produce the best, and would give the most gain, during
160 the first three months of the season; up until July 15th, anyway, in our area. But, the early
161 intensive grazing, when it started, that changed a lot of things. It shortened the grazing
162 season, down to the July 15th or the first of August, in some cases.

163

164 **Bill:** It is interesting that it has gotten that specific...

165

166 **John:** Cattle got off the grass. We've got a lot more tall grass because of it. After that
167 magic date of July 15th, the grass needs to use all of its reserves to concentrate on
168 growing leaves, not having them clipped off or grazed off. It needs to preserve the
169 nourishment for next year's crop.

170

171 **Bill:** Did you study that at K-State?

172

173 **John:** No, I was before that. I've gone to a couple of his seminars in the 70s.

174

175 **Bill:** They really made a contribution, didn't they?

176

177 **John:** They really made a contribution. Now, there is the range management...

178

179

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180

181 **John:** ...outlook, and the biologist's outlook, and they are not necessarily the same. I
182 think they are the same... the agree as to the productivity of the pastures, but whether or
183 not the early intensive grazing distorts the type of grass that continues to grow, survives,
184 the biologists don't necessary agree with that. By just grazing this first period of time,
185 you are allowing some species of grass to grow more and come back more, while others
186 are getting killed out. And there is probably some truth to that. It is sort of an invisible
187 change, though, probably, to the passerby.

188

189 **Bill:** And it is probably hard to know unless they have test plots that are actually being
190 observed. That is what they do up at the Konza.

191

192 **John:** That is exactly right. And they do at the Konza.

193

194 **Bill:** I haven't been able to spend any time up there, but, like you said, I've heard a
195 couple of lectures... of what's being done, and how it's being done... it seems to me the
196 theories do change a little over time.

197

198 **John:** The time of the burning... And, I think it is important that everybody look over the
199 long term, and try not to do stuff that causes permanent damage.

200

201 **Bill:** Do you still find ranchers who resist some of these practices that are suggested as
202 being the best?

203

204 **John:** There is always a difference of opinion. [Laughter]

205

206 **Bill:** Don't name names, but, any particular philosophies in general?

207

208 **John:** I think here, probably there is not too much resistance, but I think as far as grazing,
209 people recognize that to get the most dollars out, as a landowner, is going to come with
210 intensive grazing. But normally, any time there is major change, it takes time for the
211 majority of people to fall in line with it.

212

213 **Bill:** I'm well aware of that thought process. How about the cow calf operations then, is
214 that pretty much taken care of by just rotating where they have pasture?

215

216 **John:** I think so. Generally they have summer grass and winter grass. They'll have grass
217 for calving in the spring or in the fall, for fall calving cows. Some ranchers in Morris
218 County, and in Wabaunsee County, and I'm sure Chase County, will keep cows out on
219 the same grass twelve months out of the year, and get by with it.

220

221 **Bill:** As long as they spread them out enough.

222

223 **John:** That's correct. And recognize how much their cows eat. Genetics have really, to
224 me, made a change in the amount of grass that is consumed by a cow. Forty years ago,

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225 people weaned five hundred pound calves, or four hundred fifty pound calves, were very
226 happy; today, they want a six hundred fifty pound calf. So, it takes the calf itself eating
227 more, and the cow itself is a bigger cow, and they consume more.

228

229 **Bill:** So, it takes more land to raise the same number.

230

231 **John:** It takes more acres. Or, you overgraze your pastures. We can't control the weather,
232 so always on the dry years, that fall grazing makes fall pastures look pretty rough.

233

234 **Bill:** You mentioned fall calving. I hadn't heard anybody mention that before. Is that a
235 common practice?

236

237 **John:** It's fairly common. The economics to me are, if a calf is born in October,
238 November – that timeframe, it stays with the cow all year, then goes to grass next
239 summer. You get an extra season of grazing.

240

241 **Bill:** It is interesting that didn't come up before. I guess maybe I just didn't ask the
242 question. In an earlier interview, we had some discussion about placement of ponds on
243 the pasture in order to move the cattle in the right direction. Can you talk about that?

244

245 **John:** Yes. Ponds and salt, mineral, are about the only control you have for grazing
246 patterns. Cattle...

247

248

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249

250 **John:** ...tend to move into the wind. We have a predominantly south wind, so... Cattle
251 want to go, if the wind is blowing normal, they tend to graze on the south end of a
252 pasture. A narrow pasture, that's longer north and south, especially if the water is in the
253 south, the cattle will literally grub off that south end of the pasture; they just camp there,
254 stay there. Over the years, that kind of becomes permanent, for some reason. You can
255 really tell when you go into a pasture; one end or it, or one area of it, is just clipped off
256 much shorter than the other. I've also noticed, and I don't know whether this is really
257 agreeable, or recognized; pastures with a lot of rock, I think cattle don't like, and stand on
258 the flint rock, where you've got rough rock ledges, all over the pastures on each hill,
259 those pastures don't seem to have the same carrying capacity. I think it, number one,
260 just... there is not much soil on the flint hills there, so the grass probably doesn't grow as
261 fast as it does on the bottom areas where there is soil above the flint rock. It is interesting
262 studying pastures. I just wish I had more time. Different pastures definitely have different
263 load carrying capacity. It all has to do with the shape of the pasture, the location of the
264 water and mineral. You can put 25% more cattle on some pastures and get the same look
265 out of it as you would get on other pastures that had less cattle.

266

267 **Bill:** Interesting. Are you still involved with the actual ranching operations here?

268

269 **John:** Yes.

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270

271 **Bill:** How much land do you have at this time?

272

273 **John:** Oh, we have a partnership that, a family partnership that runs most of it.

274

275 **Bill:** [Pause] I'm going to look at my list, to see if I've missed... [more pause]

276 I guess I asked earlier, about your youth, but I haven't asked recently... in the family
277 partnership, is it mostly cow-calf, or...

278

279 **John:** It's feeder cattle. All feeder cattle.

280

281 **Bill:** It's primarily through those three months?

282

283 **John:** We keep ours year around. We buy them in the fall, and sell them the next
284 summer.

285

286 **Bill:** You winter them as well.

287

288 **John:** You try to try put on the most pounds, not just in the three months.

289

290 **Bill:** Strategic decisions, as to what is going to be the most useful... You then have
291 haying operations.

292

293 **John:** We have haying operation; we also have some farm equipment.

294

295 **Bill:** To fill in, and use the ag land for farming?

296

297 **John:** Yes, for farming. We grow corn and beans and wheat, primarily... some milo, too;
298 sorghum. We have a full mix. And we rotate, to try to get it to work the best.

299

300 **Bill:** You haven't been in ranching operations outside the Flint Hills?

301

302 **John:** No. Not really. Of course, when you get to western Kansas, it depends a lot on
303 where you are; that land changes dramatically.

304

305 **Bill:** Weather patterns, rain... I talked to John Vanier, over in Salina, and they have
306 operations over in the short grass, low rain, as well as operations out west of town, here. I
307 was able to get some interesting descriptions of the differences. [Pause] How have
308 ranching operations change over the time you've been involved?

309

310 **John:** I think the biggest thing is the number of people. The equipment has gotten bigger,
311 requiring less people. I started out on a John Deere B and a two row cultivator; I think we
312 had four of them. So, there were four kids out there, taking two rows each.

313

314

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315

316 **Bill:** Been there, done that.

317

318 **John:** Today, you've got a twelve row cultivator. Today, you don't have a cultivator, you
319 use chemicals! If you did, you'd be either six or twelve rows. Because, of course, the size
320 of the equipment has just gotten so much bigger. And, of course, that just doesn't really
321 fit the Flint Hills. For a two hundred horsepower tractor to go into a five acre field, you'd
322 just barely have room to turn around. And, there are a lot of small fields in the Flint
323 Hills... because is the area they found to farm. For farming, you are much better off if
324 you have two or three sections in a field.

325

326 **Bill:** You mentioned having wheat. Do you have tillable land large enough to put wheat
327 on?

328

329 **John:** We have rotating land where we put wheat; it is not large, but we work on proper
330 crop rotation... it works good for that.

331

332 **Bill:** Range burning, we haven't talked about that.

333

334 **John:** And I was going to mention that! Burning, you know, is also the other tool that can
335 control grazing patterns. Burning at a little different time, or later... not necessarily
336 burning every year. Although, to get the gain, the grass needs to be burned... from the
337 cattle owners perspective, it is best that the grass be burned every year.

338

339 **Bill:** So that you get a fresh start.

340

341 **John:** You get a fresh start, and, you have all fresh grass. And, there are studies that
342 show you gain about a quarter pound a day more. Over the grazing period, that makes
343 dollars. But, at the same time, there are years that you just do not want to burn, if there is
344 not going to be any grass. Clenton Owensby doesn't necessarily agree with this; he says,
345 if you're not going to have any grass, anyway, whether you burn it or not, it is going to be
346 so dry, it won't grow. That dead grass is just dead grass.

347

348 **Bill:** It ought to be burned off.

349

350 **John:** It is just dead grass. It ought to be burned off. The biggest thing, I think, is if you
351 take too much surface cover, the weeds can get a jump on the grass. If the pasture is
352 burned, and it stays black, and it gets cool, the weeds will go ahead and sprout and grow,
353 and the grass won't.

354

355 **Bill:** Then you've got a real problem.

356

357 **John:** Then you've got a lot more weeds.

358

359 **Bill:** What do you do in a case like that? Burn it again, wait until next year?

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360

361 **John:** You can't burn it again. You just have to say you made a mistake and try next
362 year. If you don't burn, the old dead grass keeps the soil covered, and helps control the
363 weeds sprouting; you can't get light down to the seed for the weed to sprout.

364

365 **Bill:** Any exciting stories about range burning, or problems, or opportunities, that come
366 to your mind?

367

368 **John:** It can be dangerous, you know. We've been lucky, and not had any problems. It
369 does get exciting when the fire is getting away from you, though. But, over the last few
370 years, the equipment has gotten a lot better.

371

372 **Bill:** And techniques, and lots of experience...

373

374 **John:** Experience, yes. There used to be some people who drove out on Sunday morning
375 and threw matches, and went back home... and worried about it later on. But that doesn't
376 happen today...rarely happens.

377

378 **Bill:** Part of proper land management. All the skills and techniques are there. [Pause] Any
379 particular stories passed down through your family that stand out as unique
380 experiences...

381

382 **John:** This is more banking than ranching...

383

384 **Bill:** That is ok!

385

386 **John:** The bank was robbed once, in the Bonnie and Clyde era. It sits right on the corner,
387 and the vault was in the lobby at that time. My Grandfather was walking down the street,
388 and looked in the window and looked in there and saw someone holding a gun. So, he
389 knew, and assumed, that the bank was being robbed. So ran into the hardware store,
390 across the street. The hardware person, and himself, grabbed shotguns off the...

391

392

Track 79

393

394 **John:** ...wall of the hardware store and ran out about the time the robbers were coming
395 out of the bank. A gun battle ensued. Unfortunately, they grabbed bird shot rather than
396 buckshot... but, they did wound the driver of the car. The gang car went south, and went
397 around the block; they pushed the driver out of the car, as it was making the turn to go
398 around the block. The gang got away and they finally caught them in Denver; but didn't
399 recover any of the money. I don't know how much money... My dad, at the time, was in
400 high school; he viewed the whole thing out the window of their high school classroom
401 that was just a block from the bank.

402

403 **Bill:** That is certainly a memorable story. The kind they make movies out of.

404

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405 **John:** Exactly. [Pause]

406

407 **Bill:** Any accidents? On the ranch? We forget how rough life was...

408

409 **John:** Cattle are dangerous; horses, especially on pavement. Shod horses can really just
410 dump somebody crossing the highway or something when they start to slid and slip.
411 We've had a couple of people get hurt on a horse; get hurt pretty bad in a lot, trying to
412 sort cattle on foot. Farming has improved, a lot; I think people have become more aware,
413 over the years. From when I was younger, you'd see a lot more accidents.

414

415 **Bill:** More serious accidents.

416

417 **John:** It's more important to go slow and keep your whole body. It's risky business.

418

419 **Bill:** Flip that over: what are some of the most pleasant memories you have had from
420 involvement on the farm, ranch, bank... life in Morris County?

421

422 **John:** I just have a lot of good feelings. I enjoy the Flint Hills. I enjoy the solitude of the
423 Flint Hills; just being able to get out, away, and enjoy the beauty: the fall beauty as well
424 as the spring beauty. There are five clear seasons out there to look at and see.

425

426 **Bill:** Five?

427

428 **John:** I call burning a season.

429

430 **Bill:** Burning is a special season. OK. I like that.

431

432 **John:** Yes, because you see the black, and then here comes the green. The winter is ice
433 and snow.

434

435 **Bill:** And we are enjoying that now! [Laughter]

436

437 **John:** Our ice storm was plenty this year. There will be plenty of pictures of that.

438

439 **Bill:** Really had it rough, this year; some more than others. In a hundred years, how do
440 you want people to remember your ranch?

441

442 **John:** Well, I just would think that we were good operators.

443

444 **Bill:** And the thing would still be going...

445

446 **John:** Yes, it would still be going... about as it is now.

447

448 **Bill:** With whatever the latest technology...

449

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450 **John:** Lot of controversy on wind energy – and we are right in the middle of it. We’ve
451 got half the people that are for it...and half the people that are against it.

452
453 **Bill:** You have people that would really like to put the windmills up?
454

455 **John:** Yes, very strongly. Especially if they live north of town; there was a company,
456 J.W. Windpower that really was taking leases. Florida Power and Light was in trying to
457 take leases, also. They were looking at west of town; west and south.

458
459 **Bill:** What do you see as the... how that is going to fall out?
460

461 **John:** Well, I think our present governor, Governor Sebelius, really has tried to preserve
462 the center core of the Flint Hills.

463
464 **Bill:** The heart of the Flint Hills.
465

466 **John:** Whether that will continue in future years, when her term is up, we don’t know.
467

468 **Bill:** There are windfarms being built further south.
469

470 **John:** Yes, right across... I think her bottom line was highway 400, which is just north of
471 Beaumont. There is a windfarm right below it – right there. [Laughter]

472
473 **Bill:** I’m sure that is it. It seemed like it was awful close.
474

475 **Track 80**
476

477 **Bill:** Since our organization is primarily interested in promoting the Flint Hills as a
478 tourism destination, we certainly want to keep it that way. On the other hand, we are also
479 very environmentally sensitive, so alternative energy and the idea of the wind farms is
480 fine. It is just a matter of where you put it.

481
482 **John:** It is really tough to know which is right.
483

484 **Bill:** It is really hard to know. [Pause] Do you see any other ways that you expect Flint
485 Hills ranching to evolve, over the next ten or twenty years? We just talked about one of
486 them, whether or not alternative energy sources come in; are there other things on the
487 horizon?
488

489 **John:** I think the cellulosic ethanol may offer real possibility. Big Blue, ungrazed Big
490 Blue gets six feet tall and has a fairly good sized stem. And whether or not that would
491 ever be considered for ethanol production; and, what is the economic value of it was?
492

493 **Bill:** Right! And long does it take it to get there.
494

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495 **John:** My thought would be: harvesting one crop of grass, could you get more dollars out
496 of that, as using it to produce ethanol, as you could using it to graze cattle? And, I don't
497 know.

498
499 **Bill:** It's a real option to be looked at.
500

501 **John:** And they are.

502
503 **Bill:** Somebody will check it out.
504

505 **John:** We'll find out, hopefully.
506

507 **Bill:** It's part of the whole issue of the ethanol; is it really economically feasible, in the
508 long run?
509

510 **John:** And the same thing, then, at what time is it best to harvest it for ethanol? And I'd
511 guess it is late in the season so you'd have the stems and the fiber as opposed to the green
512 grass blades that you cut for hay, today.
513

514 **Bill:** And how does that compare with leaving it through the winter and burning it.
515

516 **John:** And what effect does that have on next year's?
517

518 **Bill:** Delicate balance, interesting.
519

520 **John:** Yes.
521

522 **Bill:** Any other things that have come to your mind of that sort of thing? Obviously that
523 one was right there.
524

525 **John:** That was one. I had thought a lot about that. I don't know whether that will change
526 our ...
527

528 **Bill:** In recent years, the last two or three years, the ethanol thing has really...
529

530 **John:** Sure has affected the price of grain! Commodities!
531

532 **Bill:** Oh! My wife and I have talked often about how two dollar corn has been the norm
533 for all of our lives. And now, all of a sudden, it is four, five, six dollars. Just over a very
534 short period of time. [Pause] But, of course, we didn't have ethanol plants before...
535

536 **John:** No, we didn't.
537

538 **Bill:** Our home town now, we've had one for four or five years.
539

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540 **John:** And it is going to affect the feeding industry because where the ethanol plants are,
541 the feed lots are going to gravitate in that direction. Because they've got to, to cut their
542 costs, to get that distiller's grain at a cheaper price without having to pay the
543 transportation cost.

544

545 **Bill:** Are they able to use the by-products?

546

547 **John:** Yes. There is distiller's grain, it comes in either wet distiller's grain which comes
548 straight out of the plant, I think... that is fed to cattle. They can't feed a hundred percent
549 distiller's grain, but I think they can feed thirty percent distiller's corn

550

551 **Bill:** That's one I hadn't really stopped to think about.

552

553 **John:** So, right now, that is a large part of the feed lots' ration is utilizing distiller's grain,
554 because it is a cheaper feed. We have customers here that utilize it. Also, they have dry
555 distiller's grain. The wet distiller's grain, especially in the summer, it has to be used
556 pretty quickly, or it begins to mold. In the winter it can be kept longer. It generally takes
557 a fairly good sized operation to justify the wet distiller's grain, in order to buy a semi load
558 of it, 50,000 pounds of it, and be able to feed it out in five or six days.

559

560 **Bill:** Big feed lot.

561

562 **John:** It takes a big feed lot.

563

564 [The tape stopped there, at the end of Track 80. Track 81 was not readable; reason
565 unknown. We were near the end of the interview, but, I believe a bit was lost. Very sorry
566 about that! Bill]