

INTERVIEW WITH LEWIS FULTS
DONNELLY, MN.
MAY 21, 1974
Julie Harlan, Interviewer

Q: I'm Julie Harlan, the date is May 21, 1974. I'm at the home of Lewis Fults in Donnelly, Mn. Mr. Fults will discuss the farm bureau during the years when he was president- from 1963 to 1967. I need to know your date of birth and your place of birth.

I was born in Iowa- Franklin County, Hampton was the county seat...let's see, way back in 1905. Does that cover that?

Q: Yes. How long have you been in this area?

We moved here in 1940. That would make it about 35 years, wouldn't it?

Q: How many occupations or professions have you worked at?

Really farming has been my main thing. I did go off to school for a couple of years in Mankato and worked in this lumber yard... I believe that was the only outside thing... I decided to come back- work on a farm for a year, until I started farming and I've been at the game ever since.

Q: OK, and you're presently farming, right?

I suppose you could say I'm farming, but I'm supposed to be retired now. We have the land rented to the boys, and the cows to the daughter and the boys... I just stay here and work as I feel like, sometimes it comes to more than you feel like. We farm about between the two places here, about 410 acres, we run about a 30 to 35 cow dairy herd, and Virgil has a 1000 bird laying house.

Q: What do you have planted?

Oh, we started out... oats and barley, Virgil has a little wheat and corn, Virgil has soybean- we don't, we need all our corn land to build these two silos on. So we don't go into beans anymore. We use barley for our cash crop.

Q: I don't even know what people use barley for. What is it used for?

Well, that's what they drink when they go into the tavern. They make beer out of it.

Q: Oh really!

Molding barley is the better grades of barley that we raise through this territory and into North Dakota, and it's grown and goes into beer. There is barley, a different grade or variety ...lower grade that sometimes goes into feed. It is a good feed for any livestock if you get them used to it.

Q: The reason I'm interviewing Mr. Fults is because he was the former president of the Farm Bureau for Stevens County. What would your view be of the objectives of the Farm Bureau?

I suppose any kind of group of people or organization that's in common business should try and get together and try and work on their problems to find a better solution or a solution to better themselves, their own standard of living, and also the community. I've had fellows tell me that- " I don't think we should pass a resolution if it's only good for us, if it isn't good for the community; we think it should help the whole vicinity." That is in my words, a brief description of what it is. So that we can get together and try to figure these problems out, what we want, and carry our message to the legislature and to the congress, and wherever they're applicable. Do you want to know some of my experience in the Farm Bureau?

Q: Sure

(77-5 min.)

I suppose I got interested and joined just after I moved up here in the 40's. I started active as a unit chairman, when we had a township units here. Then I was on a county board for a good many years, until I was elected county president. During the time I served on the resolutions committee, the policy development committees at the county level for quite a few years, then I was fortunate enough to be chosen to serve on the state legislative committee. Which to me was the most educational few days or a week that I ever put in in my life, I believe. I learned more in the whole area of businesses of all kinds than I ever did before. At that time we had a little different procedure, on starting this resolution. These resolutions all come from the county- we couldn't originate one on the state level. They all come in from the units in the county. Now our job was to coordinate them. But to be able to understand these and put them together right, at that time they called in a representative of practically every major business in the state. Everything- trucking, Sears-Roebuck, and all retailers and wholesalers, and the highway department, the university- Everybody come over there and talked to us. I think the thing that impressed me was how sincere and how hard they tried to convince us that they needed our help on the things that they were working for. I've never forgotten that. The impression they made on us, trying to convince us that we just had to help them on these things. During this time I was president, I was able to go to Washington three times, to visit with our congressmen and that was quite an experience too. It's a little disturbing to see the way congress and I guess our state legislatures work down there. We're used to going out and getting things done pretty quick. It seems like the longer they can put it off or the more they can do something else, why... and all these speeches you hear in congress, why nobody listens to them, there, just the people on the radio and TV that hear them, I think.

Q: They weren't very responsive to you?

Most of them were, some of them were not. Some of them would hardly meet with us at all, and some of them spent a lot of time with us. I don't know whether we accomplished anything down there, but we let them know what we wanted, and that we were up there to try and show them the reason for it. With some of them it was real disappointing

to try and visit with them, and then the next ones would be real fine, real gentlemen, and talked to us.

Q; When you were in there, what years did you go there? Did you go like three years in a row?

I don't know whether it was three years in a row or...we sent the vice-president one year...I don't know which year it was in between ...but he went one year.

Q: Did you notice that there was any kind of a conflict between the national government- the general administration- that was mostly Johnson that was the president during then, wasn't it. Was there any trouble between him and the farmers? Any conflict of interest?

Well, when you go to Washington you never see the president, you don't hear much about him at all. But I don't think that we agreed with the Secretary of Agriculture at all, at that time. Of course he's the president's hired man- that way I suppose you could tell whether there was a conflict down there or not, but you wouldn't know from the upper end of it. A little conflict with a congressman or two, but we didn't see eye to eye at all, and they didn't tell us the way they had made it either. But otherwise it would be pretty hard to tell on a trip like that whether there was any opposition to you, too. We had good trips- they took us through the Department of Agriculture, they don't let you loose in that building because if they did you'd never get out.

(158-10 min.)

QW That's a biggie?

Oh, that's so big, the girl who led us out said, "now you stay together now, we don't want to lose some of you, we may never find you," We were through the Capitol. They claim there's 37 miles of tunnel under the Capitol in the office buildings there... you know how easy it would be to get lost. We rode this little train that goes half a mile under the ground; they told us that, we just believed what they said was all. And we visited the offices of the congressmen, and we sat in a session of the House. I got to set in the big chair that the Speaker of the House sets in. John Zwach was with us at the time, and I told him, "now when they decide to get a new chair I want you to get that and send it out here to me," and he promised, "yup, I'll do that."

Q; What would you say basically would be the political attitudes of the Farm Bureau?

Well, like it says here we're a non-governmental and non-partisan organization. We don't back any party but we try to work with all of them. This is a conservative group- we've never wanted any more government in farming than we had to have or needed. We've come to the conclusion that there is a place in agriculture for so much government. But we don't want too much. We don't want to go back into a program where the government stores all the grain and always steps in around the country, and everytime you think you're going to get a better price, they dump it on the market. Law said that this grain

could not be sold or released on the market for less than 115 % of parity, plus storage. plus interest. But there was a clause in there that said any grain that goes out of condition can be moved. We just found out that they thought there was a lot of it out of condition, and though most of it was shipped out of the country at first, later on they decided to sell it, then it was a little different deal.

Q: You weren't too happy with that, huh?

We never were very happy with this...well, I'll jump back a little bit. The Ever Normal Grain Rule program was originated in Farm Bureau, as was the soil bank. We thought and I think they were real good programs. When Ever Normal Grain Rule was suggested, we wanted the price kept at about 50% of parity, or a little better, 50 to 60%. That would give a man who needed money and had grain the chance to take a loan on there, up to 60% of the value, to tide him over until he could sell it/. Well, after the Korean war, they raised support prices high enough to where it formed the market. It made the market and the floor. And so when it come time to redeem it, why the market was lower than the price of the grain. So instead of you buying the grain back and putting it on the market, you'd just as soon take it where you want it, and let them take it to fulfill the mortgage. And that's the way the government got all this grain. And that was the thing we didn't think should be- we figured that should be lower, so that farmers kept the grain and did their own selling. On the Soil Bank program too, it never quite did go into effect, the way we wanted. We thought that should be handled so that you would take out the poor land and... it was never fully implemented. The Soil Bank started out for a couple of years in a pretty good trend, and then the idea was changed and they would only take so much on every farm and it just didn't go along with our thinking on that, although now it's pretty hard for me to go back there and pick that up. I might tell you something that's a little off the beam. here.

Q: I noticed that in 1953 there is this Wheat Certificate Referendum that the government was trying to get passed. And I read that the Farm Bureau was the only organization that didn't want it to pass. Could you explain a little more about that?

(250-15 min.)

I could go in my files in there and bring you out an envelope an inch thick and about a foot square, and you could read for two days I guess, on the information I had to gather on it. Yes, we opposed that very strenuously. And we came out real victors in it. We just couldn't see, to bring back the details of the thing, the thing that hurt the whole situation and all, they put restrictions on how much wheat you could raise. Everybody had to take a cut. And then they turned around and everybody who wanted to raise 15 acres of wheat could. Charlie Schumann, our president at the

time, said that when this wheat deal started he said only 4 or 5 people- farmers in that county that raised wheat. After they give them 15 acres a piece he had 32 that was raising wheat. They didn't have any business raising wheat down in Illinios. That isn't wheat country, and the wheat they raise isn't good milling wheat. Then they went out to North Dakota and the wheat area and everybody had to be cut down. I would up here with a 1 and 1/6 acre wheat base here they changed to a 6/10's base. A wheat farmer that was his whole main crop was the main thing he could raise- why they cut him back like that. Well this Wheat Referendum, if I can recall it right, wasn't going to correct anything. It was just going to make it worse. So much of the territory that had the surplus wheat- well, it wasn't good milling wheat. Feed wheat and lower grades like on the West Coast and Kansas, it's not hard milling wheat. So we opposed this - there's more reason in there too, but I can't think of that. We opposed it very strenuously. I remember we stayed in Morris until we got the returns and we were pretty happy over our position. It showed a backing by the people, just as the Farm Magazine, which is a real good magazine, was for the Wheat Referendum and they lost 4000 subscriptions, was the word I heard, through this deal. There was many people opposed to that kind of thinking. Our margin of victory I suppose you'd call it, was pretty big. We must of won by pretty near- I think it was over 2/3rd's majority.

Q: I read that - I think it was that the farmers who didn't participate in this thing would get \$1.00 per bushel for their wheat and the farmers who did would get \$\$2.00 per bushel. Did you see any danger of that kind of thing happening?

I believe that was... if you followed your base- that thing I was telling you about, then you'd get your price of wheat that the government set. But if you didn't follow this base, I believe I'm right on this, then you just took what the market would pay or you couldn't even sell it with a lot of wheat. For quite a few years there if you couldn't sell your surplus wheat, you could store it, and

(333-20 min.)

then you could sell it later.

Q: If they never increased your base, then you couldn't sell it?

Well, they never increased your bases at all, it was a cut. I don't believe there was ever an increase in a wheat base. If it was it was small, I just can't remember one. I could be wrong on that one too, because that's back... That was one of the things that worried us- so much of the wheat would be raised out of the wheat territory. I know the statement was made that just the 15 acre guys raised wheat and that was all the wheat they needed in the United States- the big wheat grower didn't need to raise any wheat. We don't use too much of a big percentage of wheat in the United States, so much of it is exported you know. That statement was made, that we had enough with the little 15 acre guys- fellows that had never been in wheat. We moved up here in 1940 and I put in at least 30 acres of wheat. The next year I had 14 acres- that's the year it froze out. Wheat isn't

supposed to freeze out, but it did. That was the last wheat we raised until...well when we got patriotic and thought we would raise wheat when we shouldn't, I think is when we started again. I never did wind up with more than a 6 or 7 acre base., and that was cut down, or maybe I had a 10 acre base, I don't know. You see, I could plant the 15 and not be penalized, but if I went over that then...

Q: Then you think by voting down the referendum, the farmers in this area benefitted a lot more than they would have.

We felt that the benefit would be a lot better, it would give us a chance to farm the way we wanted to and more so. If we hadn't thought we had good reason to oppose it we surely wouldn't have. And for me to tell you the details right now...we just didn't want the strict regulations and...

Q: Yes, I was reading something about that...that you didn't like the government regulation...that it would hurt the free market system?

We think that it practically eliminated a free market- through government storage and ownership of so much grain- just millions of bushels. We figured that really put a stop to free market. They could satisfy the market any time they wanted to and there didn't seem to be anything we could do about it. We think a supply of grain is alright if the farmers own it, but we don't want it in government hands. We don't want a grain reserve set up by the government. Our idea on a grain reserve is...let the countries put up money reserves, and then when they need the grain let them go buy it. Instead of piling up a bunch of grain...it costs to beat heck to store it, and some of it does spoil,... That's our idea on the grain reserve, we just dread to think that they'll get this thing into position and start storing the grain, and get this thing into government hands, then our market has got to butt government grain from then on, and we just can't see that kind of thing.

Q: Isn't there a tendency towards that now in government? Pushing towards the grain reserve?

(417-25 min.)

Oh, that is Humphry's pet farm legislation, is a grain reserve. He really wants to set one up. They complained a while back (there is no such thing as a shortage of grain) they complained about that, they were going to cut off our exports, and there was more grain stored around this country than we've ever seen before, on farms. Then they want to set up a grain reserve. Well they were talking this shortage, if they were to set up this grain reserve, they would've had to go in and buy the grain and it would have gone that much higher, and that would just about be putting the livestock men out of business if it continued. Now it's corrected itself a lot in the beef and pig prices- they've really gone up, but if it had to follow the way it was a couple of months ago for another couple of years, I think it would hve been quite a luxury to go into the store and buy some meat and some milk, because by the government people just wouldn't stay in Business.

Q: I don't quite understand what you mean, if the government bought the grain...

If they would've bought the grain reserve, that would have pulled a lot more off the market, and that would have raised the price, which would have been good temporarily for the man they were buying from, but it would have effected the livestock- your dairy and beef and hog operation. What they've been claiming is, and I guess they can prove it, is that the beef man who bought feeders, and fed them out for beef is losing \$100 to \$150 a head. Paying \$3.00 to \$3.50 for corn, some fellows made a mistake too, they paid such a big price for feeders, that they'd up to 60 to 70 ¢ per pound, and they come back on market in the 30's, the three dollar corn got better and the soybean went crazy, they just didn't make it. They lost \$100 to \$150 a head. I don't know how serious this is, maybe we're getting away from Farm Bureau now.

Q: That's all right.

We had an occurrence here last fall, that our silos went empty just about the time we picked corn and cut silage. Well, we could cut silage all right, for rottage, but we ...pretty had to handle corn that way, so we went to town and bought our corn and oats and concentrates, and ground it there and brought it home and fed them, We were feeding \$70 a day in grain and concentrate. And we were getting a \$70 a day milk check. So we were feeding the hay and silage and grain, the work and investment for no return. That happens in this kind of business and you've got to expect it, but that was a situation where if that would continue on like that, it would just put you out of business, that's all.

Q: Yes, you could stand it temporarily, but...

Arlene, Steve's wife here, her uncle milks about the same size dairy herd we've got, it's just a little farm and all he can raise is his hay and most of his silage. This year he had to buy most of his hay which ran around \$2.00 a bale which is really crazy. He buys all his grain out of the elevator, and they deliver it, and he claims he's losing \$1000 a month. I don't know why he would put me wrong on it

(492- 30 min.)

and all he buys, why he has the figures to prove it. Well you know that kind of a deal, and just being an ordinary farmer you don't stay with it that long. Maybe it will correct itself. Grain has come down some, milk just went up a nickel a hundred, not much, but that's the reason...and if they would have gone in and bought the grain, they would have pushed the price higher than ever, and after they got a big store of it stashed away here, then you'd have that hanging over the market. They claim that they would lock it in so it absolutely couldn't be released, except under a real emergency. But you elect a Congress now, and that's the way they vote, two years and you elect another Congress, and they got a whole different idea and they vote again. You can't lock that in under a government order or anything, because they have the ability to change it every time they go into session.

Q: So you'd just as soon leave the grain in the farmer's hands than to let the government worry about it.

I'd surely like to see it in the hands of the farmer, yes. They make mistakes too, but that's their own problems, too. The Farm Bureau has opposed this Farm Bill that was vetoed the other day, See the headlines are "the Farm Bureau works to sustain Farm Bill veto." Well the reason I see that we opposed this was that high target price, we just figured it would be darned expensive, and it puts us under this government control again, of government markets. It's kind of a hard bill to get straight on, but we just didn't think it was the same as the Ever Normal Grain Rule; they got the price too high, and we think they got this too high to make it a workable situation. I guess the veto is going to stand. They're afraid to vote on it now, until they find out that they can over-ride it, I don't think they'll vote. Although I think they'll probably try- the 10th of June is when that's supposed to come up.

Q: After this, say they would pass it again, then do the farmers get to vote on it like they did...

No, I don't believe so, I don't believe there's a referendum to this. This is a one-year farm bill is what the Congress will pass. It still would leave us under full production, the only thing it would guarantee that if you got a real big crop...no...got a poor crop, under 2/3rds normal yield, why then they'd pay the difference between the prices.

Q: Now there's three main farm organizations in this area, right? Farm Bureau, the NFO, and the Farmers Union. How does the Farm Bureau stand in relation to the other two? Is there conflict?

They keep hollering about us fighting all the time, but I haven't seen so many fights. We've had some pretty mean, insulting liars in the papers sometimes, haven't got a word of truth written by the opposition. But we have a different philosophy than either one of them, Farmers Union has always been in favor of a lot of government control, high supports in loans, and government control, and we're pretty much opposite of that, We don't want any more government than we have to. I recall an incident that happened in

(592-35 min.)

Morris quite a few years ago, we met a big group...they were talking about how bad things were going to get, if we didn't have these government programs and stuff, and how it would lower our standard of living, and the president, from Glenwood, Pope County, he got up and he said, " I'm willing to sacrifice part of my standard of living, so long as I can keep my freedom." And I never saw a guy get a bigger hand from a crowd than he did. I think that is the feeling of the people in the Farm Bureau, That we just don't like this control more than we have to have, there is a place for it up to a certain extent, to do certain things that your group can't do alone. That sort of illustrated the thinking there and I think that's a prevalent thing in there. I don't know, NFO... we never made a public statement about this thing...I guess the state board met for a day or two on this thing and they had one ready to publish, but it was never put out and was turned over to local authorities. I don't know if NFO or any organization of any kind, when it gets to a situation like this did, where there's violence and destruction of property, and people dead, why we just don't condone that, we don't go along with that, and I

think most sensible people feel that way. That your violence isn't what we want. It got to be a real bad situation. I was talking to a neighbor just the other day and , " when I had to ride shotgun on my neighbor to keep him from interfering with these other neighbors," he says that got pretty bad. We just didn't believe in that kind of thing, but they got a right to their opinion, same as you and I do, that's the way they think and they have a perfect right to think that way and work that way. But I don't think Farm Bureau thinks that they have a right to interfere with other people, except to persuade them or something; but to get violent or destroy property, we're not in favor of that.

Q: What would you say is a viable alternative solution to the low meat prices the NFO is trying to raise...the meat prices, what would you say is a better solution to that?

I don't know, when you get into a situation like that...like we have, it's been hurting, I think there'd be so much of a problem. Beef business was good for many years, grade prices were low and feed prices were pretty good, and they kept increasing the cattle, when prices got going high, nobody could complain any better, as good or better than farmers except the consumer, and as soon as meat got high you got a few, kind of radical people who would start a boycott and kind of work against us. Until we get this feed and cattle numbers in line we're going to have some troubles. This boost in prices now is coming a year or two quicker than anybody predicted. Maybe we'll get by, but it depends so much on the crop. If we get good crops and the cattle can be fed, why then it'll remain the same, these cattle this spring, they got so darn low in so many places for feed, and it's just range cattle and grass cattle coming into the market, but the slaughter is up quite alot. The cattle on feed now is 31%

(694-40 min.)

lower than it was last year. So now when it comes time for these fat cattle to come on the market again, why sure it's going to be a higher price if the market isn't flooded with the thin stuff. I heard a little bit of the Alexandria Farm Forum on the radio, it was the Central Commission Firm talking, and he said " did you know we have a cattle population of about 52 million and we get about 11 or 12 million new calves a year, and we slaughter about 10 million." Well, this 52 million is more than the market is able to absorb, and if we're gaining 11 or 12 million a year and only slaughtering 10 million, why we're still gaining a couple million a year, and until this thing balances out, why we'll ... it'll be hard to correct the meat situation. The number of hogs is down quite drastically, always has been, and they get a good price, but they are lower than what the feed price was. I think it's one of the ups and downs in this thing, but you get a lot of outside interference that causes a lot of it, more than it used to.

Q: Then you would say it's maybe not a question of the producers or the processors fault that the prices are low, it's more the market system?

I lay the big spread in the price of the meat from the farm to the

counter on the government taxes, and highway distributor and all the fringe benefits, that are connected. I don't believe our supermarkets are making a whole lot of money. I believe that when you add that all together, I have something in my billfold now, but I used to have a little slip of paper in there that told me how many taxes there was on a loaf of bread, a shirt or overhauls, and when you think about that that's all gone in there someplace, and they've got to have wages, well, gosh that amounts to more than we get for livestock. Quite a bit, however they get more spread after it leaves the farm than we get for raising the darn stuff. Same with milk, we get about 60¢ per gallon here for it, how much is it in town?

Q: \$1.34

Just imagine, we get \$70.10 for 100 lbs., which would be about 10 or 11 gallons, and how much would they get...

Q: They probably get about \$150 to \$160 for your \$70.

I think so, it's more than half, anyway, between that 60¢ and \$1.34. You don't see much whole milk anymore in town there, it's all 2% or skimm, gee that's pretty thin drinking to me.

Q: What do you personally think of the policies and things that the Farm Bureau puts out? And the philosophy they hold- your personal view?

The way they're processed, they come up from an individual order unit through the county, and through the county resolutions committee, from that committee they go to the annual meeting in the county, then

(837-45 min.)

these resolutions are sent to the state, and if two resolutions come in from different counties, the same resolutions, then it's put on the docket of the state, and then it goes through the delegate body, that's one or two delegates from every county. By the time it goes through this process, they're pretty hard to disagree with, all the thinking that's gone into these things and the democratic way it's done, maybe you've read in magazines where they say the Farm Bureau leaders don't really represent their membership, but there isn't anything further from the truth, I think that was another thing that impressed me when I was on the state resolutions committee, our staff works with us, they give us two or three people to work with us, the only thing they can do is help some rep or something, or if we write this thing up and our english isn't so good, then they'll help us straighten that out there, but as far as helping us to get an idea they absolutely will not say a word. We cannot throw out any resolutions if there's two, nor can we write a new one. All they do is coordinate and rewrite so that they make good sense. I don't know, you work with it so long and maybe you're prejudiced, but after all that thinking, you look at things real. We've had state legislators tell us that, "when you write that policy book, you better be careful, cause you might write something in there and we might get it wrong and make it a law, just counting on you, and if you've got it wrong, why it won't be so good." Well, we

just let them tell us that. We have a lot of support both at state and national level. I think we've done more in stopping bad legislation than we have in getting good legislation. Because there are so darn many bills. And if you follow the state legislature this year, my gosh, I've never seen a bunch of educated men come up with the most pie in the sky ideas as they did. Things that... I don't know, things that maybe they think will give them votes next time. I think one of the farmers biggest worries right now is this environment and pollution deal. They claim there's enough laws in the books right now to close up every dairy and beef farm in the U.S. I don't know whether that's true or not; I've been to a number of meetings and they're pretty scared. These committees, the more they can do and the bigger they can get, instead of using a lot of reason.

(957-50 min.)

After 30 years it's the same like using a trip hammer to crack a peanut. They just go to far on it. We probably have or will have a real problem with our pesticides and weed sprays. They're talking about making every farmer pass a test before he can spray his own crop. It's those kinds of things...some of the drainage situations that have come up. You just can't do anything...One of these magazines you've heard we're trying to build a terminal in So. St. Paul? A grain terminal? That'd be a picture of it. Then we can bring our grain right down there and export direct from there to other countries, right out of this terminal. If you read this grain scandal in New Orleans, they been grading the bad grain up, and not making them clean the ships, and been paying bribes; they claim they'll be investigating for another two years, that's what we want to get away from. But to get back to the environmental deal, our president Carroll Wilson, was walking over the grounds down there, and of course that's pretty smelly ground down there now,. And this fellow says, "Gee, it'll be wonderful if we can get a nice new building in here and clean this place up." And they're walking along and all at once here goes this little green frog jumping along and he says, "well, if you build that building, what's going to happen to that frog." It took us 6 weeks and \$2500 to convince him that the frog could jump in the river and we could go ahead with this building. Carroll wouldn't tell us that story if it wasn't so. And GGA had claimed originally to build what they called the biggest terminal in the world at Savage. They got out there and found some muskrat houses and dens along the river there. Well, gosh, you can't build that building and disturb those muskrats, and they've stopped that. Those are the kinds of things that are probably scaring farmers, as much as anything.

(1000- 58 min.)