



Indiana Humanities Council

Think. Read. Talk.

Hoosier History: DOWN ON THE FARM

The Floyd County Museum (now the Carnegie Center for Art and History) received an Indiana Heritage Research Grant for this 1996 project. The IHRG program was co-sponsored by the Indiana Historical Society and the Indiana Humanities Council, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Think about the Midwest and you think about the heartland, the nation's breadbasket, farm country. Most of us have an image of agricultural and rural life in our minds, one that dates back to a time when the typical American family lived and worked on a farm.

But the 20th century has brought massive change to this way of life. To find out about the patterns of change in the conduct of farming and the nature of rural life in southern Indiana, the Floyd County Museum sponsored an oral history project, *Down on the Farm*. They interviewed thirteen members of long-time farm families in Clark and Floyd Counties, including several who operate farms that have been in their families for more than a century.



Mr. Alois Best lives in Floyds Knobs, Indiana, a few miles northwest of Louisville. Here he talks about the self-sufficiency of the old-time farm:

"Back in 1875 when my grandfather was here, this farm was very poor and very little of cleared land. He raised some wheat and some corn and then they also had the hogs they butchered and they cured the meat. They used salt. They butchered in late November or December and then they took this meat and rubbed

salt to preserve it into the meat. That way, they could keep it into the next spring and have meat.

"Then you would cut the meat into hams, etc. and hang it up in the smoke house. You would get some hickory wood and start a fire under the meat in the smokehouse and you put sawdust on top of the fire, which would cause smoke so you'd get hickory smoked, see. My mother was a natural at curing hams. It was really good...."

"This barn has what we call double fork hay forks, so all hay was loose then. You had no balers and all that hay we had you would pull in that barn with two horses and a wagon. My father would pull this huge double fork down and stick it in the hay. We had a series of pulleys and a tract at the top of the barn. It's still there."



Interior of barn, constructed in late 1700s on land that would become Mr. Best's farm.

"We would hook the horses on the outside on the series of pulleys and pull that thing up until it hit the tract and then it was tract over to the different ends of the barn to store the loose hay. It grabbed up the hay. The horses would pull it. That was my delight. I always handled the horse business. Then the harness raised up over the top of the horses and back by pulling. Sometime when it got down near the end, he would sock that fork in too deep and pull the wagon and all up. My dad would holler and we'd have to back up...."

"We had Jersey cows. They were tremendous. They had these big milk bags that almost dragged on the ground. We'd get 2-3 buckets apiece from them when they came in. We had 20 of them we were milking...."

"Well, we get back to my mother now. She lived to be 102 years old. She milked most of them. She had tremendous strength in her hands. I remember as a little boy and used to empty her buckets. We emptied it from a bucket into a 10-gallon milk can to send to the dairy processor, and she would sit down there, and she

had such a tremendous strength milking that the milk would boil over the bucket--the foam would--and out the side. She lived a full life and she loved to farm....

"And then my father when he inherited this farm, it was just 61 acres so he bought land around us. It was mostly all woods at that time. He bought the land around him close and added 20 more acres, which is 81 acres as it exists now.



Mr. Best's father driving a log wagon.

"To start with, my dad jumped in and started clearing this land. It was mostly woods. He would cut the trees. We had a sawmill. His two brothers ran a sawmill here in [Floyds Knobs]. He would haul the logs down there and have them cut up into lumber to use on the farm or to sell, which was mostly hardwood....My father started his first big project in a 20-acre spot. He cut the trees during the winter. They worked all winter then. Farmers had no other job or no way to make a living...."

"This gave him some valuable new ground and he planted black raspberries. That was our first big project here. He had 20 acres of black raspberries in one field at the back end of this farm. We had pickers that would come from New Albany and the area here and they would pick those. My job as a young boy 10 or 12 [ca. 1924-26] would be to take the two horses and haul these berries after they were put in crates down to F.A. Best's on the corner. He had a receiving place, and they would take those berries to Jeffersonville and put them on the old streetcar. The tracks are still there along 31W. That took them to Indianapolis. There was a very good market there for berries.

"[F.A. Best] was my father's brother. He was a merchant here at that time. He had the first store. It covered the whole square that is now the shopping center here in north Floyds Knobs....Now, F.A. was a shrewd merchant and he had anything in there for the farmers. Back then it was horse and buggy days. He had everything a farmer could want: all kinds of repairs for harnesses, harnesses and

collars for horses, big bolts of goods for women. They made their own dresses in those days. They had all kinds of threads, groceries, just anything on big tables...



F.A. Best's General Store

"About 1930 we began raising fruits and vegetables: cabbage, beans, tomatoes, melons, and lots of potatoes--about 12 to 15 acres every year--and a lot of tomatoes. Tomatoes was a good crop for the Louisville markets, and the truckers would come in from the Southern states when the tomatoes were gone...."

"In 1940, my father sold the farmers here an acre of ground right down here on Scottsville Road & 150, in that area. They formed the Floyd Knobs Fruit Growers Association. Naturally, it was strawberries that they were interested in, and for 50 miles around, all the farmers were raising strawberries. They brought them to Floyd Knobs Fruit Growers Association and sold them. It was a great market."



Association building and trucks with crates of strawberries.
(From the book, Floyd Knobs, Indiana, 1800-1938.)

"Now F.A. and Charles Best had this sawmill and they built a crate factory building, right here in [Floyds Knobs]. They put them in six-gallon crates at that time. They were huge crates. Things were going great. We had these berries and the truckers would come in here and get them and would ship them to the Eastern and Northern markets: Chicago, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Michigan and Benton Harbor...."

"Well, back to the early days, where the farms were, we had no protection from fire. Most people weren't as lucky as we were. They didn't have that much water on their farms. Any fire would burn people out. I was elected Trustee in the '50s for eight years. During that time we thought we would try to get a fire truck and get some protection. New Albany would come out and only bring 100 gallons of water, so they'd just sit there and watch the house burn down.

"Albert Payton, from Greenville Township, the Trustee out there, was head of the Government Service Surplus from the old Bag plant in Charlestown. He had 40 of those trucks and he gave them to the Counties. So Albert put us on the top of the list, and we got one of the first fire trucks. We still have it down here at the Lafayette [Township] Fire Department. So I drove it back from Columbus, Indiana, through the snow. It was a great truck and they still use it.



Lafayette Township Volunteer Fire Department trucks.

"We had to raise some money to put this equipment in, so Stanley Taylor--he was the main dance band man in the area in the early days--agreed to furnish the music on the old Breen place down on the corner of Scottsville Road & 150. He let us use that building to have this benefit dance.

"It was a huge success. People came from all around because they wanted that fire protection. People from the Starlight area came down to [Floyds Knobs], and we raised enough money to make a building for the fire trucks. That's the most people that have ever been at [Floyds Knobs] at one time during my lifetime. They were just parked everywhere with their Model T's. They danced, and this building had logs under it. I was afraid the floor was going to break in. But it survived."

Sally Newkirk, Director of the Floyd County Museum, interviewed Mr. Best for the oral history project. She points out three major changes in farming over the course of the 20th century, common themes that emerged from the various interviews.

1. Farming has undergone a steady transformation from general to specialty agriculture.

In the early twentieth century, most area farmers produced a broad range of crops and livestock, including several acres of corn, wheat, hay, and vegetables, along with some combination of beef and dairy cattle, a few hogs, chickens, and perhaps a few sheep. Much of the production was for home consumption as well as for market. Since WWII, local farmers gradually have become more specialized, concentrating on a relatively narrow range of commodities, such as corn, soybeans, and beef cattle, intended primarily for market.

2. Operational costs have risen because of advanced technology.

In the early 20th century, southern Indiana farmers still relied upon horses as their primary source of power. After WWI, tractors became the major source of power for operating plows, disks, planters, and harvesting implements. Over the succeeding decades, such implements became larger, more sophisticated and more expensive. Another aspect of technological change was scientific innovations such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, genetic breeding, and hybrid seed. The expense of such innovations required farmers to become much more efficient if they hoped to stay in business.

3. Family farming as a way of life has changed dramatically.

Nearly all interviewees were reared on farms. Consequently, they have a high reverence for the land and continue to consider farming an ideal way of life. When they were growing up, each member of the family had specified chores that changed as they grew older. Most duplicated this pattern with their own children. But as the cost of farming increases and children find out about other occupations and professions that are more attractive, most interviewees were skeptical about the likelihood of passing their farms on to their children. Compounding this tendency is urbanization, which creates conflicts between newcomers and farmers and makes land more valuable for residential development than for farming. Moreover, as more land is converted to residential use, competition among

farmers for the remaining land is becoming more intense, undermining to some extent the traditional ethic of mutual aid among farmers.

Mr. Best again:

"All the traffic going here! I sat on the porch one day and counted 300 cars an hour going up and down this road. Back in [the old] days you'd see an occasional buggy going down to the Association. You knew everybody. You could sit on the porch after chores were done and see an occasional buggy and horse or Model T Ford and wave because you knew who it was. Now I go over to get the mail and, hell, I can't look up to see who's waving. I'd get run over. It's hard to get across the road...."

"Now, getting up to date, the fifth generation is starting to take over here. My grandson, Tom Best, bought a new tractor, and he's enthused about farming because he was born here on the farm, as all of my family was born right here on this farm. So the fifth generation is now taking over.

"Now we have 15 head of beef cattle. Don't have any more milk cows. I don't think anybody would know how to milk one these days. Now we raise hay for the horses and beef cattle and then we raise quite a bit of rye straw. Rye you sow in the fall about this time and then next spring whenever it gets about 4 feet tall, you harvest it. Cut it, let it dry, bale it before the seed forms in the head of the rye. Then we sell it as straw bedding at Churchill Downs to bed the horses."

Asked what the best thing about living and growing up on a farm was, Mr. Best replied: "Independence is one of them. You have your own project to work with and make a living. You're your own boss. If you're going to be successful, you have to think and plan, rotate crops. I've enjoyed farm life and I've saved my land...."

"About 2050, if the predictions are true and this population is going to double, they're going to have to teach young farmers how to farm. You can't read books and learn farming. You've got to get on the farm and really do it! It's hard work and usually in hot weather. You have to be able to take a little sweat on your brow. I guess that's what you were born for: to raise your meals by the sweat of your brow. Isn't that what they say?"

In her final report on the oral history project, Sally Newkirk concludes:

We heard stories of how farmers would adjust their crops to meet changing demands from consumers; farmers shared stories of working together on large tasks and helping each other out during hard times; we heard stories of the dangers of farming and accidents on the farm; farmers talked about the seasonality of farm activities and the kinds of recreational activities they enjoyed when time allowed. Most importantly, the farmers talked about their attachment to the land—the pride they feel in making things grow and in preserving a way of life they feel is being threatened.

Some of the changes the farmers spoke of included the lack of capable, qualified help in harvesting and other activities; the competition from imports of produce; the increasing difficulty and high cost of earning a living and supporting a family on a farm income; the loss of valuable farm land to suburban development.

It was clear that all of the farmers we interviewed were happiest when they were working the ground or sitting on a plow. Many of them were retired or retirement age, but they did not seem to ever truly give up farming. They continued to walk the fields and plan crops for the next season. Even with all of the changes in farming, they still believed they had the best life and enjoyed the self-sufficiency and "being my own boss" that farming could provide.

Post Script:
Farming Online?

From the Floyd County Museum's interview with Dennis Konkle, Indiana Farm Bureau's 1996 Farmer of the Year:

"We have a computer here that we are able to look at the Chicago Board of Trade. We have a 15-minute delay, but we know exactly what the grain prices are trading at, and at what month in the future. So we can use the Futures Market to project a little bit better price further on down the road than just harvesting a truckload of corn and taking it straight to the elevator and asking, 'What will you give me for it?'"

[Interviewer: "I noticed on your computer, also, that you had a weather monitor. That's a big change from a 'woolly worm.'"]

"It's hard for us to catch the news because we're in-and-out so much. With the satellite weather system here, I don't have to watch the local weather. I have it

here at all times. When we're planting or harvesting, I know how many hours I have before it's going to rain. I can also tell the extent of the precipitation that will be coming through by the color combination on the screen. We can also see when a cold front is coming in. We have a 5-day extended forecast also."

[Interviewer: "What's the biggest change you've seen in farming?"]

"The past 10-12 years of technology is amazing. We use computers on our cow herd, which tells when we can artificially inseminate. We have computer patches to put on their tail heads to know when they're in heat, the hour they were in heat, and when we should artificially breed. So the technology, even in the beef section, is amazing.

"On row-crops we look at global position. We can map every foot of our farm to know the soil type and fertility. Then we have capabilities in our combine to put the computer chip in and get the yields of every square foot of our farm. Because we know our yields, we can adjust our fertilizer applications. Nowadays the consumer applicators can take our maps in their trucks and program their trucks to spread at certain levels in our fields. They may spread 30 different levels in a 3 to 4-acre field."

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