Interview conducted by Bill Smith; Recorded on Marantz Digital Recorder;  
Transcribed by Bill Smith

[Bill Smith opening comments: I talked with Paul Seeley at this ranch in Greenwood County, Kansas, a few miles northeast of Eureka. When I arrived, Paul and his son-in-law were workings some cattle (cows and calves) in the pens outside in the yard – separating some calves to be taken for vaccination. By the time they got done, he hadn’t eaten lunch yet, so we were just talking, when I realized our conversation should be part of the interview. I turned on the recorder, as he continued to eat.]

Track 2

Bill: Ok, we were talking about where the cows came from… where the steers and heifers came from…

Paul: Fellow by the name of David Noonan, lives in Burlington, Kansas. He buys these cattle, locally, from sale barns and from local farmers, ranchers… and winters them and brings them to us on the 15th of April. We’ll graze them until the 15th of July. He’ll sell ‘em or feed ‘em, …

Bill: Do whatever… He takes them to the next step.

Paul: Yes. Then, the other cattle… they probably have a greater range of where they came from. They belong to the Spealmans. [the dog jumped on his lap, Paul got him down] We started grazing their cattle, I don’t know, ten years ago, maybe,… and, first starting out I didn’t know they had anything but down at Dalhart. But, they brought us a lot of cattle out of Dalhart. Those cattle had quite a history. They… A lot of those cattle originated in Mississippi, Georgia…and they take them out to Dalhart, and but them on wheat pasture… out there… they bring ‘em to us, and put another 200 pound on them; sell them. Or feed them. And then, I found out later this guy had several brothers. One of them and his father lived up at Horton, north of Topeka. This is the first year that we have not had some from the boy from Dalhart’s cattle. This year, the people from Horton sent us all their cattle. They’re a little better quality cattle then the boy for Texas sends, ‘cause he was buying southeast cattle.

Bill: That’s interesting. Are they mixed breeds or…?

Paul: Oh, ya! Everything.

Bill: I noticed the herds coming out here…just…

Paul: All colors!

Bill: All colors, shapes and sizes, and… really strange! But they are mixes of steers and heifers? …all end up in the packing plant, mostly?
Paul: Ya, all of them.

Bill: All of them, eventually…

Paul: The Spealmans – they just brought us steers. The boy from Burlington, he brought us a package of steers, and the rest of the heifers. He brought 200, roughly, 250 heifers and 50 steers. And then Spealmans brought us 360…

Bill: You get paid by the head?

Paul: By the head.

Bill: Doesn’t matter which… steers or heifers?

Paul: No.

Bill: Do they gain at different weights… different rates?

Paul: Yes. Heifers won’t gain quite as much as steers. Then… the cattle…it depends on how they were handled prior to when we get them… as to how much they gain. The flesher they are, the less they gain.

Bill: … the less they gain. [chuckles] How do they decide where to go? Is it personal relationships? Are there differences, even in different parts of the prairie land? It is one the things this project is supposed to help determine…to talk about is… differences between grazing here in the Flint Hills, or in different parts of the Flint Hills? What’s the difference between here and NOT in the Flint Hills? Why to people up in Horton bring people down here? … or from Dalhart up here?

Paul: I think… the availability of pastures…

Bill: Availability has a lot to do with it.

Paul: Ya. Horton, for instance, that’s farmin’ country. They don’t have as much grass.

And Dalhart… Dalhart, it’s the same story… just

Track 3

Paul: west of here…they’ve got a lot grass, but it’s different. And then, it depends a lot on ownership of the pastures. Here, this area was famous for absentee owners. Still is. So, they rented. Right across the road here, is 320 acres that I rent from a lady lives down in Corpus Christi, Texas. I’ve got another 80, up on the north end; the lady is a school teacher, in Kansas City.
Bill: And you run some of those same cattle on those pieces?

Paul: Yes. Then you develop a relation with your land owner, hopeful, it is good.

Bill: Sure! They get some money. You get the use of the land, and some money.

Paul: Yes. We all benefit a little from it. They get the most, I think!

Bill: The most! (chuckles) Well, the landowner… they have some risk there. They’ve either invested a lot of money, or they’ve got some debt…

Paul: But, it’s worth a lot of money!

Bill: Its worth a lot of money, yes!

Paul: Yes. You know what this land is selling for today? It’s impossible… It’s just…if a fellow… it’s not impossible if the man don’t have to borrow any money. But if he has to borrow money to buy the land, to operate with, it’s impossible for him to pay for the land.

Bill: And make anything of it. And come out ahead.

Paul: Ya. He can’t make a living with it. It’s kind of sad. One of the reasons, I guess, I don’t know… one of the reasons land is so high… there’s so much money among… everybody… and people wanting SPACE… just wanting space. And then, they want a place to hunt. They want a place to go on the weekend and look at the pretty scenery.

Bill: And there really is enough of that… enough people to buy the land to do that…

Paul: YA

Bill: …just to own the land. And then, they look for other things to do with it for the rest of the year.

Paul: Ya

Bill: That’s incredible.

Paul: Now in Texas… there’s parts of Texas, right there…[Paul hands Bill a magazine]

Bill: Livestock Weekly! [Reading masthead]

Paul: It’s just full of ads. And one the things they talk about in these ads is… I’m trying to find it… is hunting! Is hunting available?

Bill: ATTENTION HUNTERS!
Paul: Here’s “ranches for sale.” You start reading those ads… I’d say over half of them will mention hunting availability. There’s good game… there’s turkey… there’s pheasant, there’s whatever… deer.

Bill: Deer.

Paul: A lot of deer. But, it’s just full of it.

Bill: And they’re willing to actually buy the land then just come out and…

Paul: And they’ll make more money… some of these guys that own these ranches used to run cattle on it, have quit running cattle on it, and are just leasing it out to hunters, and making more money off it.

Bill: Making more money annually.

Paul: …then they would running cattle on it.

Bill: So they’re actually… Then they’re… presumably they’re doing some wildlife management, to be sure the hunting is there. Maybe adding a lodge…

Paul: Sure.

Bill: Converting the facilities so people can stay there and hunt.

Paul: Whatever it takes.

Bill: Amazing. [Pause]

Paul: I… running the sale barn, I don’t know if you know anything about running sale barns…

Bill: My dad used to go to them all the time.

Track 4

Bill: I hardly ever went with him. I seemed to have other interests at the time.

Paul: Well, besides dealing with the livestock, the livestock part of it is easy. Dealing with the people…

Bill: That sounds familiar.
Paul: The land prices… I know I can get 800 hundred an acre for this. But I could never pay for it if I had to borrow the money. Could never pay for it. And I think… I’d hate to price it at a thousand, because I think I could get it.

Bill: You could get it.

Paul: I know I could get 800.

Bill: Ya. How does the easement, the conversation easement we were talking about earlier, affect the price of land?

Paul: Well, it would have an affect on it. The closer you get to Eureka, the more effect it would have. Because it is closer to town; its only four, five miles over to the blacktop road.

Bill: Having the easement would reduce what you could get for it?

Paul. Yes. It could. It depends on your buyer.

Bill: What their rationale, or motivation is, for buying it?

Paul: Yes. All the real estate people in town, they’re made at me, because…

Bill: For putting the conservation easement on? It takes the value away?

Paul: Right.

Bill: They get a percent of what they sell it for!

Paul: Yes, and they could sell it to some old boy that could develop it. Cut it up into 40 acres.

Bill: Yes.

Paul: 160 acres. We talk about burning… One of the problems with burning, and one of my favorite stories is about the old boy, he and his wife worked his whole life, and wanted a place in the country. And, they final found this quarter of section, out in the hills. They could buy it, and still keep their jobs in Wichita. So, they come out, and build this modest little home, out here in the hills. Both of them go off to work. Springtime rolls around. They neighbors burn the pastures. Didn’t burn them, maybe, but burned all around them. She comes home, in the evening, the house is full of smoke. She’s calling the County Commissioners.

Bill: Oh, absolutely.
Paul: She wants that stopped.

Bill: Not that the house was burning, but the house was filled with smoke.

Paul: She had left the windows open. It was a nice spring day.

Bill: Oh, my goodness.

Paul: those kinds of people. The other thing those same kinds of people do. They have this 160 acres; grandpa used to live on the farm and knew all about farming, knew all about ranching, knew all about it, didn’t have to ask anybody about anything. So I’ve got five horses, and thirty-five cows and some sheep and goats for the kids… and, pretty soon, its eat off. It wouldn’t burn if you wanted it to burn. Its just eat off. And then the brush starts. You’ve got hedge trees, here, and always the brush comes in, the buck brush, and it’s just a mess. And the prairie is gone.

Bill: The prairie is gone. Even though it hasn’t been plowed, or anything, because it was eaten off, too much.

Paul: Right.

Bill: The prairie couldn’t be sustained.

Paul: Right. And to get it back. I watched some people try to do that. This road from Eureka to El Dorado, when you get close to Rosalia and on west there, there’s people doing all kinds of foolish things out there. The cedar trees are growing up.

Bill: Ya, I’ve wondered on some of those spaces, where there are cedar trees, what can you do? I know one I drive by, over on highway 75, it looks like they’ve tried to burn them, they’ve tried to do everything. And it hasn’t made any effect at all.

Paul: It’s tough. You’ve got to remove them, probably,

Tape 5

Paul: …mechanically. Then you can burn the trash, maybe. But if the managed it right, they wouldn’t have to do anything. If they’d burn it every other year, or every two or three years, those little cedar trees are easy to kill. And, a lot of the other bush, the buck brush, the hedge brush, and that, is easy to kill.

Bill: If you do it every couple of years; it doesn’t have to be every year.

Paul: Ya, right. Then, the secret to that… burning is, you’ve got to have some fuel. You can’t graze it all off…
Bill: And then expect to burn it. There’s got to be grass to burn.

Paul: Ya. [pause] Have you ever been up top the Konza Prairie, up by Manhattan?

Bill: Yes.

Paul: I was on a tour up there, I need to go back, it was real interesting. They’ve got, I don’t know how big the ranch is, but it is good size. There are sixty some plots, they’ve got it divided into.

Bill: Test plots.

Paul: Yes, test plots. One of the comments this old boy made was that these big oak trees… that big around [gestures] big old thing… around the bottom. We was talking about the prairie, and he says this used to be prairie and there weren’t any trees around here. And I says, gosh sakes, those trees… He said, yes, we’ve figured, some of those trees were about a hundred years old.

Bill: Two, three foot diameter?

Paul: Ya. Ya. He said they weren’t here when the Indians had it.

Bill: I’ve wondered about that.

Paul: Then, I’ve heard these stories just recently about the buffalo. Old Zebulon Pike, the guy they named Pike’s Peak after… he was up just north of here…

Bill: He came right through, pretty close, didn’t he? Is that marked in any way?

Paul: I don’t know.

Bill: I was just reading about that, the other day, and wondering if that is another trail we ought to be looking at.

Paul: I don’t know, but the comments he wrote about, he saw these millions of buffalos. The hills were just covered with buffaloes. We’ve started to think about how the buffalo grazed the prairie. They were in huge herds. They’d come through, just trample it, eat it all… and moved on! They moved on, and maybe didn’t come back for several years. See?

Bill: Hadn’t even thought of that. It wasn’t every year.

Paul: No. It wasn’t every year.

Bill: They’d wander a different place, in different year.
Paul: Ya. They moved on. As a result of that, the prairie recovered! And then, you think about a tree, a little oak tree out here. Say it got good luck, and got to be six, eight foot tall. Ten foot tall. But you had that prairie grass up there, four foot tall. And this wildfire comes through, not in the spring, but about the first of August, fifteenth of August, it’s hot, and dry, and it burnt that little tree up. But, there’s nothing there to graze the grass again, for maybe several years, and the grass came back. That burning, at an irregular time… The farmer and rancher said, “We’re going to burn in the spring.” But, nature said, we might burn it in December, or July or August, whenever. The prairie was developed different than what we’re used to.

Bill: Even trying to be “natural” in the restoration…

Paul: That’s right.

Bill: Interesting. Interesting.

Paul: It’s fascinating to dream about what might have been…

Bill: Oh, yes, it always is. “What if” stories are really fascinating. And it all comes out

Track 6

Bill: comes out of your imagination based on your experience. [Pause]

Paul: I’ll bet you know him. You know Don Coldsmith?

Bill: Oh, ya. I don’t know him personally, but I’ve read all his books.

Paul: Have ya?

Bill: Yes. Two or three times I’ve been going to go to one of the seminars where he was at and really spend some time with him, but it hasn’t happened yet. But, I certainly know about him, as I said, I’ve read all his books.

Paul: We’ve read most of them. I enjoy him, because he talks about the Indians burning… cause the fire attracts the buffalo.

Bill: That was their belief.

Paul: Ya.

Bill: I read it before I knew all this stuff. Maybe I need to go back and look at it again. [Laughter] [Pause] I was fascinated… I was reading something the other day that put a different way than I’ve heard before…that was, in the Flint Hills, almost all ranchers are
also farmers, and farmers are also ranchers. But it has been… at least the ranches I’ve been on; always have an area in the bottom land where there actually is farming. Would you say that’s true?

**Paul:** Ya. I’ve observed, running the sale barn, there are farmers; there are farmers that own cattle. There are cattle people that farm; then, there are cattle people who don’t farm, like there are farmers who don’t have cattle.

**Bill:** That fascinates me.

**Paul:** But there’s very, very, very few… very few; I’ll bet there’s not five percent… that are successful doing both – farming and ranching.

**Bill:** Really!?

**Paul:** The season, in this part of the country, the seasons require their attention; because it’s this season we have to do things with the cattle. Because it’s the season, the same season, we gotta’ farm.

**Bill:** And they come at the same time…

**Paul:** They come at the same time. And, there’s very few, who can manage…

**Bill:** That can manage their time and resources…

**Paul:** Everything.

**Bill:** Everything, around the weather…

**Paul:** There just aren’t very many… good farmer/ranchers…

**Bill:** That’s interesting. They’re either one or the other. [Laughter] And, that probably has as much to do with their interests; what they really enjoy doing…

**Paul:** That’s true.

**Bill:** You’d rather be out on the tractor; you’d rather be on the horse… or the 4-wheeler.

**Paul:** I had a neighbor kid over here that sold his pasture land, and bought machinery… loved machinery…bought that machinery, and went broke. [Laughter] Not everybody would do that, but…

**Bill:** He might have gone broke going the other way too! [Laughter] Who’s to know? I grew up on what was called a general farm, where we had some livestock, some cattle; Dad raised mostly hogs, he raised a lot of corn, some beans, some oats. But, most of the time, he grew the corn, to feed the hogs, to convert to money. That’s kind of what I grew
Bill: fascinated, out here, watching. Tell me the cycle, in a year, with cattle. You said it’s seasonal. Because, I’ve heard Josh Hoy and his wife … He’s supposed to be the chairman of this committee, and he can only be there on certain days, because I’ve got to be out with the cattle. [Laughter] It’s kind of funny. One side of him wants to do this… but if the cattle need him, he’s there… somewhere else. There’s a difference between just grazing cattle and the cow calf operation, like you have here? Are these the only two alternatives or are there those who do otherwise? I’m asking you three questions…

Paul: In the Flint Hills, those are probably the two alternatives, unless… there are some farmers that will have some crops… and they will winter some cattle. In other words, they’ll buy cattle, and put them on some cool season grasses, like I have here. They can buy cattle in the fall, and graze them awhile on the cool season grasses. Or, if they are farming crops like Milo or corn, they’ll have some corn stalks, or something like that, that they can use with their cows, or cattle.

Bill: Where do the hay bales come in? We see all these big hay bales around. When are they used, or not used.

Paul: They’re generally used in the wintertime.

Bill: To get through the winter…

Paul: Uh-huh. And, to me, it’s a very costly… because of the machinery required. I let the neighbors bale my hay, a little bit of hay here, on a share basis. The reason that I maintain these is mainly just for cool season grasses. And, in the early spring, for instance, these heifers, we worked here that had the calves [earlier, before the interview got started] calved right out here, north of the house, in this brome field. That happened in March… February, March.

Bill: Is the brome a cool period grass?

Paul: Uh-huh. Then, there is another way to use it; and it’s the way I did for several years is … I wanted some cattle to graze native grass. But, I didn’t want to buy them all at once. I wanted to spend my time, over at the sale barn, picking up what I thought were bargains. So, I’d buy a few, and bring them over and put them out on this grass, to get them started, and then put them out on the prairie. So, it was green grass in March; even some green in February, March…
Bill: Where the prairie grass isn’t…

Paul: Right. It’s beneficial to a cattle operation. It’s pretty near like a tonic. You don’t have to fill up on it, but just a little green…

Bill: Just a little bit. [Laughter] Rather than feeding the hay.

Paul: Ya. The hay is utilized mostly by the cow men; the people that have cow herds.

Bill: So someone else… the farmers are growing the hay… and selling the bales to the cow people… cattle people.

Paul: Unless they put up their own hay… put up prairie hay, you know.

Bill: They do that later in the season, then?

Paul: Well, no, it ought to be…

Bill: In my experience, you did hayin’ in May, June and July… first, second, and third cuttin’…

Paul: Well, that’s alfalfa you’re talking…

Bill: That’s alfalfa! Different land.

Paul: When its brome and fescue we’ve got here, it’s…

Track 8

Paul: Mow it in June, first part of June. Prairie grass, you mow it the first two weeks of July. The reason for both, really, is, after you get the hay off, is to give the grass a chance to come back. The physiology, I guess that is the word, of the plant, grass, and a lot trees, is that it stores in the wintertime. It stores in its roots. In the spring, it explodes. It grows. About the 15th of July, or sometime in that area, it changes. It starts putting the supply back into the roots. So, if you cut a tree down, in late July or August, you have damaged it; because it doesn’t have the leaf to manufacture the food, to go back into the roots. And the same way with grass; after you graze that grass off, and you don’t give it enough chance to develop that leaf, after you’ve grazed it to store energy in the roots, then you’ve weakened it.

Bill: So that is why you get the cattle off by July 15th.

Paul: Right!
Bill: So that it has the rest of the season to put the nutrients back into the roots.

Paul: Right.

Bill: It seems like an awfully long time.

Paul: Ya! 75 percent of the gain on grazing cattle from July 15th [he meant to say April 15th] to the 15th of October, which we consider a full season, of grazing; 75% of the gain of the cattle, the weight gain, happens by the 15th of July.

Bill: So that’s when most of it is taking place. Then, move on to something else. Move the cattle off to someplace else to get their nutrition. [Paul utters agreements] Whatever the next stage is… Most the cattle that are grazing are yearlings?

Paul: Yes, anymore, they are. One the interesting things that we are watching, is this ethanol business; the high cost of corn for the feed lots… and the economic deal of the cattle business. We may see more cattle grazed longer… in the Flint Hills… just to get a bigger animal…

Bill: To move them further along…so they don’t have to get the grain-fed later… to finish them off.

Paul: Right! Take a little less grain, to do it. So if we do that, if that happens, then we have to give these cattle more acres; and probably have to keep them on there longer which I don’t like, but we may have to.

Bill: But if you spread more cattle over larger acres, it wouldn’t cut the grass down, quite so much.

Paul: Right.

Bill: What’s double stocking?

Paul: Well, that’s what we are doing. Way back, when I used to manage a ranch, down near Fall River, Elk City, Kansas, for an oil man out of Wichita, we used to run 2300 cows, we’d graze 1500 steers, and had a little feed lot down there. We could feed about 2000 cattle down there. At that time, that little feed lot was one of the largest feed lots in Kansas. [Laughter]

Bill: Really! When was this?

Paul: That was the late ‘50s, early 60s.

Bill: That’s changed!
Paul: Ya… but I used to lease grass over here at Rosalia

Track 9

Paul: …and the Dunn Ranch, that just sold here a while back, I used to lease that. The old man I leased it with was quite a character. He had a rule of thumb: You give a yearling four acres and you give a two-year old five acres. You give a cow – you run a hundred cows to a section, so that would be 6.4 acres. Of course, the cows then were probably 900 to a thousand pounds cows; now they’re 1200 to 1400 pound cows.

Bill: Really!?

Paul: The style of cattle has changed. So, if we go back to his stocking rate, we would… double-stocking then, would give them 2 acres, instead of 4. And that’s kind of what we do here. We give them a lot less acres, but move them off quicker, so it comes back. I’m not sure that… well, when we started this; we were grazing cattle that came in here at 475… maybe 5, at the most. Now, these cattle are coming in weighing 5 and a half to 6 hundred pounds.

Bill: Larger!

Paul: Larger. So we are going to have to give our cattle a few more acres, than what we originally thought. So, that’s what double-stocking is. One of the sad things about some of these people who double-stock is… and I get accused of this, but I don’t do it… you charge me for the pasture season, and I take my cattle off, and you restock it… you bring some more cattle in. We don’t. We don’t do that. We try to… now, we use these cows… we come back on the grass with these cows, where we’ve grazed these yearlings. But we do that after a hard freeze. So the grass has quit growing.

Bill: So you don’t do it until the fall.

Paul: Right! … ‘til the grass quits growing. Then, we’ll come in and supplement the cows with protein supplement.

Bill: They’re not going to be eating as much grass.

Paul: Well, they’re not eating growing grass. It’s quit growing. It’s stored its supply in its roots. It’s dormant, for the winter.

Bill: It’s just standing there. You can feed a little bit.

Paul: You can harvest that. You can eat it all. The bad thing about eating it all is the lack of mulch for the rains. That’s one of the disadvantages of burning too early. I had a dramatic experience when I was on the ranch at Fall River. Neighbors eat their pastures off, just slick; and I had pasture right next to it. We had a lot of mulch of our grass. Came
one of these two inch showers… hard rains… These old kids ponds filled up; my pond never filled.

**Bill:** You were holding the water. Interesting.

**Paul:** Right! Learned that real early in my career! [Laughter]

**Bill:** Watch, observe, and learn.

**Paul:** Yes.

**Bill:** What is backgrounding?

**Paul:** Ok. You take these calves here; you wean them in October, probably… and sell them to somebody. They want to take those calves and do something else with them. They want to put them on some stock fields, or put them on wheat pasture…

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**Track 10**

**Paul:** …put them in the feed lot, maybe. These calves are very sensitive to being pulled away from the mothers, and its upsetting to them, like it would be to a child. They have to learn to eat and get along with the rest of their herd. And, they have a lot of sicknesses; that is one of the reasons we vaccinate. Before we wean these calves, we’ll re-vaccinate them, about a month before we wean them.

**Bill:** So you’re not weaning these you had here today. You were just pulling them out to be vaccinated. Then you’ll put them right back in with their mothers.

**Paul:** Right. The vaccine they’re getting now creates a little bit of immunity.

**Bill:** Is this the first time you’ve vaccinated them?

**Paul:** Yes.

**Bill:** And they’re what, three or four months old now?

**Paul:** Born in March. So, about September, about the first of September, we’ll get them in, again, and we’ll revaccinate them, again. Then, when we wean ‘em, they’ve got a tremendous about of immunity built up to handle the stress of the weaning, and all the other diseases. Not everybody does that. So the guy buying these calves to put on his wheat pasture or to graze his stock field or to put them in the field lot, he will background them, in other words… or have somebody do it. And they have these backgrounding lots where guys take cattle in and do that. And you always have some sickness in these calves…
Bill: What are they doing when they are backgrounding?

Paul: Well, they’re teaching them to eat; they’re giving them probably a medicated feed ...

Bill: This is whether or not they’ve had the second vaccinations?

Paul: Yes, regardless!

Bill: This is a normal process that goes on every cycle. What do you call those calves in October, when they’ve just been weaned? They’re not yearlings yet, until the next spring?

Paul: Ya, probably, and we just call them calves.

Bill: You just call them calves.

Paul: Some of them will brand them; some of them will do all kinds of things to them ...

Bill: And that goes through the fall and into the winter? Then, some of them will come back out on the prairie as yearlings to graze?

Paul: [utters agreement] Some of them will go on the feed lot. Depending on how they well they are taken care of during the winter time. If they grow real fast, put on a lot of flesh, they might just go right to the feed lot. If they are thin, at the end of winter, they will probably come on the grass.

Bill: Each different cattleman will approach it differently...

Paul: That’s right. It depends on their feed supply, what they want to do...

Bill: How they want to allocate their costs – how they think they can get the maximum gain, over a particular period of time. [Paul utters agreement] So, that is why you see so many different combinations.

Paul: There’s another aspect to it, its timing. It used to be important. I don’t think it’s as important as it used to be. A guy says, I like that October fat market, so these particular cattle are weighing 400 pounds now, what do I do to have them fat, ready to kill, in October? What do I have available? What do I have to do to hit that market? Somebody else might like the December market. Or, his feed supply, his...

Paul: …help his ability as a farmer or rancher… Some of the successful farmer/ranchers will say I don’t have the help, now, to do this. So I want to do it at the right time.