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

Track 36

Bill: This is Bill Smith, I’m in the office of John K. Vanier at 1244 N. Ohio in Salina. We’re working on the Flint Hills Ranching Impact Oral History Project. That gets us official; I guess it is about 1:30 in the afternoon on Monday October… June 25th. I was just writing October, … October is on my mind; not quite appropriate… You have ranching interests both in the Flint and substantially outside of the Flint Hills; is that correct?

John: That’s correct.

Bill: Where do you operate in the Flint Hills?

John: We’re between Council Grove and Herrington.

Bill: OK.

John: Right below Weinerville, if you know where that is.

Bill: OK… On my way over, when I went out of Council Grove, I went south from Wilsey, down through the place that says Diamond Springs, and over to Burdick.

John: Right.

Bill: Was I going through any of your territory?

John: Yes, right east of the Diamond Spring sign, oh, a half a mile or so back up the hill there; we’re on both sides of the road there.

Bill: Ok. One thing I was going to be sure I ask, so I’ll just jump right into it; I noticed the Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks going through there are now a bunch of rocks. What are they doing there?

John: They’re taking up the track. They started this year.

Bill: It is just recent that they are taking up the track.

John: That is correct, uh-huh.

Bill: So…that is why the rock is still there… that was the bed of the track, and they’ve just removed the ties and the tracks…
John: That’s true.

Bill: Are they going to make a trail, or are they going to…

John: No, I don’t know what their plans are, but they aren’t talking about a trail.

Bill: They’re not talking about any kind of a trail…it’s kind out in the..

John: Not that I’m aware of.

Bill: For trail purposes, it’s kind of out in the… I don’t want to say out in the middle of nowhere … because it is beautiful countryside.

John: They have removed most of the bridges.

Bill: Have they?

John: Uh-huh.

Bill: So that would make it very difficult to use it for anything else.

John: Right.

Bill: So they’ probably just return it to… leave it the way it is.

John: I assume…

Bill: It really doesn’t bother anybody… sitting there like that…with the bridges out. That would remove some of their liability.

John: Lot of nice gravel there! [Laughter]

Bill: Lot of nice gravel! That’s for sure. It would be nice to pull it up and put it on the road there… [More laughter] County commissioners would probably like to do that, too.

[Pause]

So what kind of… what do you use that ranch land there for, then?

John: It’s primarily…

Bill: How do you handle it?

John: … grazing. We have a cow calf operation, and also a yearling operation.

Bill: Both?
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John: We use them both.

Bill: Ya! I was just talking to Paul Seeley down in Greenwood County, last week, trying to get clear in my mind what the difference is. You only graze a few months of the year... on the yearlings? How does that normally work?

John: On the yearlings, it's usually a summer grazing operation. Cow-calf, of course, the cows are there year-round.

Bill: They're there year around?

John: Right! Right.

Bill: Any... particular reason... to use a particular breed of cattle for either of those?

John: No... I don't think so...

Bill: Appears as though there is quite a mix... just driving by... and seeing what's there.

John: Well, I think, again, that is a personal preference.

Bill: Of the individual cattleman?

John: There is some difference in performance. And, again, it is a personal preference thing.

Bill: Right... Do you have mostly your own cattle? Or, or do you...

John: No, we're basically... we have our own cattle.

Bill: ...contract... You have your own cattle out there.

John: Yes. We may buy some yearlings... but we have our own cows, and bulls, and so forth.

Bill: Right.

John: Raise our own calf crops.

Bill: So it is all your own operation, rather than bringing somebody in...

John: Yes sir!

Bill: Own the land, operate the land, with your own people, and your own livestock.
John: Yes sir!

Bill: Do you move the livestock from there; from the ranches in the Flint Hills to other ranches? Or are they pretty much... stay in the same place?

John: Well, the... the yearling operation, they go to the feed lots... after the grazing season.

Bill: When the grazing is done?

John: Right!

Bill: Ok ...

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Bill: Pretty routine.

John: Yes, it is.

Bill: Do the same thing, every year.

John: Yes.

Bill: Same time, every year.

John: Well..., every year is different, you know. You have different seasons, different weather... and so forth.

Bill: One the things I was... I had read somewhere... talking about the Flint Hills, so I asked Paul the other way, and he had an interesting answer. I’ll ask you the same question. It mentioned that one of the... perhaps a distinct thing about the Flint Hills was that... we think of all the grazing land... but almost every ranch property also has some farming land on it... in the bottom lands, or where ever.

John: Um-mm [agreeing]

Bill: And, how do you handle... do you do that work yourself, or is that custom done, or...

John: Well, most of our...

Bill: Do you do much farming, or... do you not have much farm land.

John: We don't do much farming in the Flint Hills. We've turned most of the farm land back to brome grass.
Bill: Ok.

John: And, of course, brome grass is an early season grass. We bale it in the spring, and graze it in the fall and winter.

Bill: Very good. That I hadn’t heard before, so I’m glad to hear it. He did mention having some brome out north of the house there. But,… do you get more than one cutting of the brome?

John: No, just one.

Bill: You just do one.

John: Uh-uh [agreement]

Bill: When does that tend to come?

John: Oh, right now…

Bill: About right now?

John: Uh-uh. We’re finishing up…

Bill: A lot of big bales out there.

John: We’re finishing up this week.

Bill: Ok, so it’s in June…

John: Latter part of June…

Bill: Latter part of June, then you let it sit for a while, and then put cattle on it, in the fall.

John: In the fall.

Bill: [Pause] Does the … let’s just take some of the ranch land you that you got further west… that’s not in the Flint Hills.

John: Ok.

Bill: Is there a diff… do you have different kind of operation there? Do you handle it differently? Or is it basically the same?
John: We handle it a little different. We have land here in Saline County and also in Ellsworth County, which is the adjoining county.

Bill: Right. Just to the west.

John: Uh-uh [agreement] It’s a different geology, and … our grasses our different. This area, the Saline-Ellsworth county area is in the Dakota sandstone area.

Bill: Right.

John: And, we have a lot of springs… our watering system is different… and the grasses… we’re in an area, kind of transition, from the tall grass of the Flint Hills to the short grass of western Kansas. We have all of ‘em in this particular area.

Bill: Right. Is there a fairly clear delineation, or does it move back and forth?

John: No… Well…

Bill: And, I was kind of fascinated coming down Highway 4, then, it seemed like you’d have range land for awhile, then there’d be some wheat and alfalfa fields, then range land. Is that fairly typical? Or did it just happen to be the region I was driving through?

John: No. I think that is fairly typical. Fairly typical. [Pause]

Bill: Can you graze as heavy on the short grass as on the tall grass?

John: No. Of course, the tall grass… its best in the summer time… when it is lush and growing. The… short grasses are better for fall and winter. They’re short… they have more food value to them in the winter time… than your tall grasses do.

Bill: That’s interesting…. Is it… you don’t graze as heavy… you don’t stock as heavily then…

John: No, no.

Bill: More acres per head. Is there a rule of thumb?

John: I was afraid you’d ask me that! [Laughter] Yes, there is a rule of thumb!

Bill: Not something you think about every day.

John: [Pause] We figure… now, I’m trying to think…about ten acres per year per cow. Now that’s a rule of thumb.

Bill: Ya!
John: That means it never applies! [more laughter]

Bill: That’s kind of like an average pond…

John: That’s right!

Bill: It could be six inches in one place and six foot another.

John: And the Flint Hills…

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John: …for a grazing season, you can figure smaller acreage then that, but then, in the winter time, you have to feed them more hay.

Bill: Ya. You’ve got to have the hay for those you’re keeping over, the cows you’re keeping over.

John: Yes.

Bill: I just remembered I’m supposed to take a picture of you. You’re smiling so nice, may I…? [Click of the camera]

John: That might cost you. [smiling]

Bill: That might cost me… that came out pretty good… that shouldn’t be any problem [showing him the digital photo on the camera] Thank you!

So, that is definitely a difference… the difference in grass… and the difference in moisture… and the time of year.

John: Right. We’re about 28 inches a year, out here. The Flint Hills are 35, 36, I think, something like that. So, that makes a difference.

Bill: Yes, it does. So, there is more rain over there, and it’s drier, as you move further west.

John: Right.

Bill: I guess that’s to be expected.

John: Ya.
Bill: And the different topography. [Pause] You’re involved… you and your family and company, are involved in a lot more than just ranching, are you still in the grain business, and this sort of thing?

John: No. We’re…

Bill: Or are you pretty much just the cattle now?

John: Right. We sold the milling business… and most of the grain business in 1970, and ‘72

Bill: Oh, quite a while ago, then.

John: Yes.

Bill: As I mentioned, I involved a bit in the background getting your dad into the Hall of Fame, the Kansas Business Hall of Fame, so I’d read some of that background material. Of, course, that was quite a while ago. Things have changed a little bit.

John: Ya.

Bill: You’re still big Kansas State supporters though.

John: Usually.

Bill: Of course, we’d love to have you at Emporia State, too… But that’s a whole other story.

John: That’s a good school!

Bill: We won’t get into that. I just finished my thirteenth year, so… got two more to go.

John: Good!

Bill: I’m a big booster of Emporia State.

John: That’s a good school!

Bill: Ya. It does a lot of good things. Our business school got our accreditation a few years ago… we’ve worked hard to get better… continuous improvement is what you’re supposed to work on, so… It’s a good challenge. A lot of good students coming out of Kansas.

John: Ya, there is.
Bill: [Pause] We mentioned Diamond Springs a while ago. Is there really anything... are there people who continue to look at it from an historic point of view, or is it just a bump in the road at this point in time? The Santa Fe people come by sometimes?

John: I think they do. You know, I’m only out there once a week or so.

Bill: You’re not out there.

John: It’s my understanding that there is people that try to follow it...

Bill: On a regular basis...

John: On a regular basis... Now, the original spring is on our property... and we... well, I hate to make a blanket statement... but we try to leave it open to the public, because we don’t want [chuckle] a lot of people in there, but... it is open to see, for anyone that wants to see it.

Bill: Good! Appreciate that! [Pause] But there aren’t any... there’s nothing there of any... other than the spring itself... anything of significant...

John: Just the spring.

Bill: There are ruts marked in different places, but there probably aren’t any around there.

John: Well, you know I haven’t seen any to speak of, to say that’s what they are... there are signs down the road three or four miles that say: “Ruts” off this way or that way.

Bill: I’ve seen them.

John: I’ve never recognized them.

Bill: It’s just an indentation, and whether it is or not is subject to speculation.

John: Ya. [both chuckle]

Bill: [Pause] Let’s see what else I had on here. Since I know you’re not right out there moving the cattle every day... all of these... some of these questions aren’t... as applicable...

John: Yes.

Bill: Are there unique features or unusual landscapes on your property that... Diamond Springs are one thing some people think are special... are there anything else, in the Flint Hills property.
John: I don’t think so… it is just pretty typical Flint Hills property.

Bill: My view coming through, just south and east of the springs, there is some little…

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Bill: ridges that are kind of interesting, a little higher, you know, come up and down… rather than… down around Chase County, you know… it seems… almost seem more like small mountains.

John: Ya.

Bill: But you can go up and be on top and see all over. Here it seems to be a little more rolling… I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. [Pause] They’re not FLAT!

John: No.

Bill: [Laughter] There is a lot of contour and a lot of character. But, uh… if you’re looking to compare to the Rocky Mountains… then they are pretty flat.

John: Un-uh [agreement]

Bill: [Pause] How long has that land been in your family.

John: The original portion, about half of it, was in 19… about ’52, or 3… We owned quite a bit of land up north of Manhattan. And when they took all that land to build Tuttle Creek… we moved down…

Bill: Moved south.

John: …and bought this place.

Bill: …picked some of that up.

John: Uh-uh [agreement]

Bill: You mentioned the cattle, the yearlings, when they’ve had their summer grazing and put on some weight, and go to the feed yards…

John: Um-um [agreement]

Bill: All of your movement of cattle now, is by truck?

John: Yes.
Bill: I assume…

John: Yes.

Bill: Has that been for as far back as you can remember, or was there a time when they were moved by rail… or other?

John: That was before our time.

Bill: …before our time… [both laughing] …easiest way to say it… that was kind of what I thought… [agreement] Yes, there was one real nice set of pens down there…

John: Yes, there still is an old set of pens down there… I don’t know… I’ve never seen ‘em used.

Bill: Ya. Now just load directly onto the truck?

John: Right.

Bill: [Pause] How do you do that? How do you get the cows around to get them in the truck?

John: Well, we have pens, that uh…

Bill: Portables? Or are they…

John: No, most of ours are permanent ones.

Bill: You have the permanent ones set in the particular position for the particular pastures.

John: Well, you drove by a set of ours, coming from Wilsey down to Diamond Springs.

Bill: Yes, that’s the ones I was thinking about. That’s a nice set.

John: Up on the hill.

Bill: Up on the hill, on the north side of the road.

John: Right. That’s our pens.

Bill: So, when you’re ready to go, you round them up and bring them in there; work them through; get the ones you want in the truck; the ones you don’t, run them back out.

John: Right.
Bill: When I was talking to Paul Seeley the other day, he and his son-in-law were working a bunch of cattle… they had some calves they were pulling out for vaccination. They were running them in and out of the pens. I hadn’t seen that personally, actually seen that done, since I was in high school. It brought back a lot of memories. [laughter] You have to shove that gate, to get them to go in the one you want. In one place, he was standing there with the gate, to get them to go to the left or the right. The calves were supposed to go one way, the cows were supposed to go the other. It took a lot of patience to get the cows and calves separated. [John utters agreement] I enjoyed that. I know he wasn’t doing it for my amusement. [Laughter] Very serious business operation there… Those calves needed to be vaccinated. [pause] Do you do range burning?

John: Yes.

Bill: Extensively, or every other year, or…?

John: Well, we try to burn a portion every year.

Bill: You burn a portion every year, and rotate it over a number of years?

John: Ya!

Bill: So that it keeps it all fresh and clean?

John: We try to keep it clean.

Bill: Keep it clean is what you’re a really after?

John: Basically; that’s right.

Bill: In those areas where it is nice, wide open range.

John: Right. We cooperate with the neighbors, you know.

Bill: Work together… But that is standard procedure?

John: I think you could call it standard procedure, yes.

Bill: You don’t do that out here in the short grass, or do you do some burning in the shorter grass?

John: Well, we’re changing our philosophy out there a little. We’re going to have to do more burning.

Bill: Are you?

John: We’re being invaded by woody plants; trees, woody brush, and so forth.
Bill: On the grazing land…

Track 40

John: Right!

Bill: That’s not desirable.

John: No, it isn’t.

Bill: Very undesirable. [pause] Interesting! Is that a recent event, or…?

John: Well, in my life, it is. [Laughter]

Bill: It’s not something that’s been going on for 30, 40, 50 years?

John: No! No… thirty years ago, we fought fires all the time, but now we’re going to have to start using them as a management practice.

Bill: As a management practice…

John: You know, a hundred years ago, the Indians burnt quite a bit of this country…

Bill: Right!

John: …and I guess that’s what we have to get back to… is those practices…

Bill: Is the invasion of the hard woods from some particular source, or just the natural… wind or birds…

John: I’ll tell you one thing… is the Federal government.

Bill: Really?!

John: Yes, sir.

Bill: In what way?

John: In the Homestead Act, they required to plant so many hedge trees… and we are having trouble with hedge tree invasion. But, what I was thinking of, was the Red Cedar.

Bill: The Red Cedar in particular.

John: You bet! That’s a real problem!
Bill: All over.

John: Ya. And, they still encourage Red Cedar for windbreaks. I think its crazy, but…

Bill: …and then it spreads…

John: And then they spread, hu-huh!

Bill: If they’re anywhere, they start showing up everywhere.

John: You bet!

Bill: It is interesting. I didn’t realize it at the time, when we first moved here from Arizona. Of course, from Arizona to the Flint Hills, is quite a different… area, but, one things that fascinated me… and I really didn’t have any idea… and I didn’t ask any questions… When I’d drive up 35 to Kansas City and teach, we have a night school up there where we teach, along the road are all these little cedar trees. In little splotches [sic] … I wondered why they didn’t take them out… why they just let them grow.

John: There’s some small areas… well, around our place… neighbors that haven’t done anything… and they have just completely taken the pasture.

Bill: And, as they get bigger, the only thing you can do is go out and cut them off. The burning or anything doesn’t…

John: Well, if you can get them on fire, they burn good.

Bill: Will it kill ‘em?

John: Yes. One thing about a cedar… you cut it off, it doesn’t regenerate. They will burn. There is enough sap in ‘em to burn. But, you’ve got to get them hot.

Bill: And, it’s better if you get them early.

John: Get ‘em early…

Bill: Rather than before they get to big.

John: If you can get them at the height of the grass. You can get them.

Bill: There’s one… we go down 75… there’s one field over on the east side of the road, that must be, I don’t know, 10-15 acres. It’s just covered with these things… about this high [gestures about three feet]. It looks to me like they’ve burned it, three or four times. And, they’ve got most of the trees killed now, but they’re still sitting there. [laughter]
John: Well, that’s true.

Bill: I don’t know if they’ll eventually go out there and cut them and try to salvage that grazing land, or not.

John: Well, they’ll rot off after years, but it takes years.

Bill: Years and years, ya… Can’t make cedar chests out of those… Boards, I guess, are too tiny.

John: Well, they use them for fence posts.

Bill: Do they?

John: Ya, but the rot faster than the hedge does. [Pause]

Bill: And you use regular barb wired fence for…

John: Yes sir!

Bill: They all looked in good shape out there.

John: Yes, that’s another cost…

Bill: [laughter] Cost of business, constantly…? Keep your employee busy in the off season? I’m sure they love that. [pause] Interesting question, I’ll just ask it. Describe why you’ve remained a rancher in the Flint Hills, and why you will continue to remain a rancher in the Flint Hills.

John: It’s a way of life. That’s my only answer. [Chuckles]

Bill: That’s the right answer, I think. What are the best stories passed down to you by your family about life on the ranch in the past? What are some funny stories, sad stories or serious stories? That’s a… Do you have any you want to tell?

John: Not that I can recall, right now.

Bill: You’d just as soon skip that one, right now? [pause] Ok! Any bad… worst disasters that have happened on the ranch?

Track 41

Bill: Happiest and joyous experiences on the ranch? This is mostly for people living right out on the ranch. I guess you live out on a ranch southwest of town, don’t you.
John: Uh-huh.

Bill: That’s where I talked to your wife last week. Bothered here… [phone ringing in the background] She was very kind… I appreciated it!

John: Well good!

Bill: Ah! This is an interesting one. The first one says, the stories you’re going to tell your children and grandchildren… The next one is: In one hundred years, what do you want people to remember about ranching now? Do you care? What do you think the place will look like in fifty years, a hundred years? Will it sustain like it is? [phone ringing again]

John: Uhhhhhhhh… Oh, boy!

Bill: Be philosophical for a second…

John: I hope it does. The place in the Flint Hills is far enough from any town that I think it will.

Bill: There shouldn’t be any urban sprawl invasion there; up around Manhattan, I guess they’re having quite a time.

John: Oh, yeh!

Bill: Fort Riley. Here.

John: One of our pastures, there, near Manhattan, is… have you heard of the Coburn Hills Golf Course?

Bill: Oh, yeh!

John: Well, that was our property.

Bill: Oh, was it?!

John: Ya! My daughter’s developing it. But, out here, I don’t know

Bill: No reason to believe, at this point, it won’t continue on pretty much as is…Is that what you’re suggesting?

John: [affirmative utterance]
[At this point, I asked a new question, and he asked me to shut off the recorder. He asked that I not include this in my report. I thought I had turned the recorder off. In fact, I had not. Therefore, I have edited that Track by splitting it, including the above, but, removing that which was not supposed to have been recorded – to honor his request.]