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

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

Bill: So you are not a born native of…

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

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

John: My great-great grandfather came in 1857.

Bill: Right at the beginning.

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

Bill: What was his name?

John: His name was Thomas White.

Bill: We’ve got Tom White, John White, Bill Smith – lot of complicated names.

John: Short names, yes.

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

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

Bill: Very good. What’s your personal relationship? When did you come back and how long have you been…
John: I grew up in Council Grove, and I started full time in the bank when I finished with college in 1970.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John: The evolution.

Bill: Yes, the evolution over time… any particular memory of working with the cattle as a youngster?

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

Bill: Where did you go to college?
John: I went to undergraduate at K-State and graduate at Law School at KU.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bill: Even after the treaties were signed, I think there were some activities they didn’t like.

John: Still didn’t like.

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

John: I think when I look at it, we’re really lucky that our forefathers preserved the Flint Hills. And I think, obviously, to my knowledge, there was never a movement or any activity to do it, it was just inherently important to them to live upon the land and take care of it. I think they realized that if they didn’t take care of the Flint Hills and treat them properly they weren’t going to have anything. Most of the homesteads did till a few acres
to provide food, food for the cattle and food for themselves. But, other than that, they lived off of the pasture of the Flint Hills.

Bill: And that has proven to be very productive.

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

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

John: You have problems. That’s right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bill: Did you study that at K-State?

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

Bill: They really made a contribution, didn’t they?

John: They really made a contribution. Now, there is the range management...
John: …outlook, and the biologist’s outlook, and they are not necessarily the same. I think they are the same… the agree as to the productivity of the pastures, but whether or not the early intensive grazing distorts the type of grass that continues to grow, survives, the biologists don’t necessary agree with that. By just grazing this first period of time, you are allowing some species of grass to grow more and come back more, while others are getting killed out. And there is probably some truth to that. It is sort of an invisible change, though, probably, to the passerby.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bill: Don’t name names, but, any particular philosophies in general?

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

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

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

Bill: As long as they spread them out enough.

John: That’s correct. And recognize how much their cows eat. Genetics have really, to me, made a change in the amount of grass that is consumed by a cow. Forty years ago,
people weaned five hundred pound calves, or four hundred fifty pound calves, were very happy; today, they want a six hundred fifty pound calf. So, it takes the calf itself eating more, and the cow itself is a bigger cow, and they consume more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**John:** Yes.
Bill: How much land do you have at this time?

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

Bill: [Pause] I’m going to look at my list, to see if I’ve missed… [more pause]
I guess I asked earlier, about your youth, but I haven’t asked recently… in the family partnership, is it mostly cow-calf, or…

John: It’s feeder cattle. All feeder cattle.

Bill: It’s primarily through those three months?

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

Bill: You winter them as well.

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

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

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

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

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

Bill: You haven’t been in ranching operations outside the Flint Hills?

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

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

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

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Bill: Been there, done that.

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

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

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

Bill: Range burning, we haven’t talked about that.

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

Bill: So that you get a fresh start.

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

Bill: It ought to be burned off.

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

Bill: Then you’ve got a real problem.

John: Then you’ve got a lot more weeds.

Bill: What do you do in a case like that? Burn it again, wait until next year?
John: You can’t burn it again. You just have to say you made a mistake and try next year. If you don’t burn, the old dead grass keeps the soil covered, and helps control the weeds sprouting; you can’t get light down to the seed for the weed to sprout.

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

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

Bill: And techniques, and lots of experience…

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

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

John: This is more banking than ranching…

Bill: That is ok!

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

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

Bill: That is certainly a memorable story. The kind they make movies out of.
**John:** Exactly. [Pause]

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

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

**Bill:** More serious accidents.

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

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

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

**Bill:** Five?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Bill:** And the thing would still be going…

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

**Bill:** With whatever the latest technology…
John: Lot of controversy on wind energy – and we are right in the middle of it. We’ve got half the people that are for it…and half the people that are against it.

Bill: You have people that would really like to put the windmills up?

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

Bill: What do you see as the… how that is going to fall out?

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

Bill: The heart of the Flint Hills.

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

Bill: There are windfarms being built further south.

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

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

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

John: It is really tough to know which is right.

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

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

Bill: Right! And long does it take it to get there.
John: My thought would be: harvesting one crop of grass, could you get more dollars out of that, as using it to produce ethanol, as you could using it to graze cattle? And, I don’t know.

Bill: It’s a real option to be looked at.

John: And they are.

Bill: Somebody will check it out.

John: We’ll find out, hopefully.

Bill: It’s part of the whole issue of the ethanol; is it really economically feasible, in the long run?

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

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

John: And what effect does that have on next year’s?

Bill: Delicate balance, interesting.

John: Yes.

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

John: That was one. I had thought a lot about that. I don’t know whether that will change our …

Bill: In recent years, the last two or three years, the ethanol thing has really…

John: Sure has affected the price of grain! Commodities!

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

John: No, we didn’t.

Bill: Our home town now, we’ve had one for four or five years.
John: And it is going to affect the feeding industry because where the ethanol plants are, the feed lots are going to gravitate in that direction. Because they’ve got to, to cut their costs, to get that distiller’s grain at a cheaper price without having to pay the transportation cost.

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

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

Bill: That’s one I hadn’t really stopped to think about.

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

Bill: Big feed lot.

John: It takes a big feed lot.

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