

Extension Oral History Project – Harold Kerr and Tom Zinn - Part 4

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Place: Tom's home in Corvallis

Time: 33:17 minutes

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig, Oral Historian

Transcriber: Sue Bowman

EU: This is part 4 of the oral history interview with Harold Kerr and Tom Zinn.

[00:08]

Harold, let's see; we're up to 1969 and you have moved, then, to Heppner.

HK: In February of 1969, the dead of the winter.

EU: What position did you have there in Heppner?

HK: I went to Heppner as the wheat agent, the agronomist, and the staff chairman and the 4-H agent who was there was also a livestock agent, so it didn't make sense for me to try to change that, even though that was my background because he was already doing that and everything was working fine there, so I agreed, like Tom agreed to be a horticulturist, I agreed to be an agronomist, not knowing exactly what I was getting into.

EU: So what's the difference between an agronomist and a horticulturist?

HK: Black and white (laughter). Agronomists are farm crops, cereal crops – wheat, barley, corn, hay, and potatoes was always questionable. In Oregon it's an agronomy crop but in other states it's a horticulture crop. It's not sure where it belongs. I remember agreeing to that job, having had nine years experience as a 4-H agent in Prineville and in those days – we'll get into that more later – but in those days, my

supervisor, Jerry Nibler, which Tom mentioned, just came up a day or two after I got there and said, "We need to take you up and have you meet the County Judge." So we go up to meet the County Judge, his name was Paul Jones, and a real gentleman, a retired wheat farmer, big man, sitting in this big chair behind this bid desk leaning back with this cowboy boots up on the desk. And so he doesn't really change his position as we walk in. He knew Jerry from previous times and Jerry said, "Paul, I'd like you to meet the new county agent." He looked over at me and I'm thinking to myself, "Well, I've got nine years experience and all and I know a little about this world;" and he says to me, "He looks to me like a young kid that's not dry behind the ears yet." I thought, "Oh boy, this guy's going to be tough." Turned out he was a prince of a guy and was very helpful to me in my role as county agent and he was county judge.

[2:35]

I made myself a commitment that I would spend no more than three days in the office and two days a week I would go out and get acquainted with farmers. Because I wasn't sure they were ever going to come to me and I wanted to meet them and so I just assigned myself a different road and would drive until I found a farmhouse or saw a tractor and walk out to it. Well, it's probably one of the smartest things I did because I remember early in that process - I saw this tractor out, quite a ways out in the field. The typical wheat field could be five or six hundred acres or more, so walking out to the middle of the field was sometimes quite an effort. This ground had been plowed and I was working my way across this plowed ground. Finally got out there, assuming I was going to meet the owner, well, I met a hired man. And so we chatted for a few minutes and I thought, "Well, that was kind of a waste of time," and walked back to my pickup and drove down to the house and met the farmer's wife and had coffee with her and then went on down the road.

Well, it wasn't very long afterwards we were at a meeting and that farmer eventually ended up being county judge and he was telling people, "My hired man said that new county agent is crazy." The neighbor said, "What do you mean?" "Well, that kid walked all the way across that field just to introduce himself," he said. But that established a reputation that I was willing to go out and meet with the farmers. I've hinted at I've met

more farmers' wives if I stopped at the house because they were in the house rather than out on the tractor, so a lot of the people in the early days, I knew their wives, but I hadn't met them yet.

[4:20]

TZ: You ought to tell the story about the fact that you just moved into Heppner and you went into to see the county clerk, and what did she tell you?

HK: Oh yeah (laughter).

TZ: You can't get away with that now...but...

HK: She said, "Oh, you're the new county agent." And I said, "Yes." And she handed me this Democrat form to register to vote and I said, "How did you know I was a Democrat?" And she said, "It doesn't matter what you was, you're in Morrow County, and the county agent and you're now a Democrat." (Laughter). I don't think they'd get away with that nowadays. But she did. She ran the courthouse. County judge had to admit that she was the boss.

[4:50]

Another time out on a farm visit I stopped and this guy was hooking up twelve John Deere drills together in a cable hitch to pull, so he could pull twelve drills at once. Well, I had never seen more than one drill behind a tractor in Lakeview and Prineville; much smaller fields, and I said, I'm not going to recall his name right now, "Paul, I've got to stay and watch this. I've never seen anything like this in my life." He said, "Well, who are you?" And I said, "Well, I'm your new county agent and I'm supposed to know something about wheat but I've never seen anybody pull twelve drills together." I said, "What do you do when you get...how do you get from one field to the next?" and he said, "I own everything as far as I can see; I just drive across the county road and keep seeding." He eventually abandoned that thing because it was a little awkward, but it was pretty amazing that he could hook up ten of those drills together. More often, they hooked at least four together and seeded behind them...Caterpillar tractor.

Like I say, I knew very little about growing wheat. I remember, one of our livestock agent friends said, “You doggonne wheat guys.” He said, “It’s just a five minute word and you can talk all day about wheat.” “It can’t be that much to it.” But it really is quite a scientifically grown crop and as Tom will talk about it when he went to Turkey, the Northwest was unique in the world for being able to grow wheat on rainfall, that wasn’t supposed to be enough to grow wheat. And so they grew what they called “summer fallow” and grew a crop of wheat every other year.

[6:30]

EU: Do you want to talk about that now? Why don’t you talk about exactly....

TZ: Makes sense to you to have there here now? Okay, Elizabeth.

EU: We’ll get back to Turkey in a minute. But talk about the summer fallow.

HK: Yeah, well let’s let Tom talk about it because he’s the expert. He went to Turkey and taught them how to do it.

TZ: Want me to talk about it? Well, in the Pacific Northwest, and that’s the reason why I went to Turkey then, and we don’t need to talk about Turkey now, but in the Pacific Northwest between, say like, The Dalles, Oregon and across the river on up into the Palouse and in parts of Idaho, and some in Montana, but mostly in that general area I just mentioned, we had what they call a summer fallow system where they leave the crop idle, I mean they leave a piece of land idle. Let’s say a rancher has 2,000 acres. He’s going to farm, 1,000 of it and have it in wheat and then the other 1,000 is going to be in fallow or nothing. Otherwise, he’s going to plow it, disc it, or whatever and leave it lay. Maybe plow it in the fall or plow it in the spring and leave it all summer. Keep the weeds down, so weeds don’t grow, so he may till it in the summertime two or three times and then that fall, he’ll plant it into wheat.

And the reason for that is if you kind of can imagine a glass of water and you fill that glass of water and you don’t put a cap on it, it will evaporate. So, when you fill that soil

profile, if you look at a soil profile as a glass of water, and you fill that from the winter rains and the spring rains and then you till it over the top of it, that's like putting the cap on it. So you are storing not all the water that comes down in the winter, but you're storing a good portion of it. Then if you till it in the summer and let nothing grow like the weeds, because a weed is like a water pump and if you keep those down, then you have enough moisture in that soil surface in the fall to germinate a wheat seed. And it takes roughly around 21 inches of rainfall to grow a crop of wheat. Well, in those areas where you've got ten to twelve and year, you don't have enough. You're not going to get a crop every year, is what I'm saying.

[9:00]

So, years back, about when we started developing, it was '45, '44, '42, '45, right after the war, during the war, when we started having tractors and they replaced the horses, this was when the summer fallow system really developed. We could get over the ground, we could plow it in the spring when it was still just moist, but still had moisture in it, we could seal that surface over so the water wouldn't evaporate and then that fall we could plant wheat in there. And you can plant wheat if you do it right and if you have adequate moisture, I mean normal moisture, you can plant wheat in there at about three or four inches depth, using a special drill that furrows the soil out and goes down about three to four inches; puts the wheat seed in there, covers it up about an inch or half an inch and then there's enough moisture there to get that wheat seed out of the ground without any rain. And we know we are guaranteed, normally, rain in November/December so by that time we have enough rain to bail us out and get the wheat crop out of the ground. And then from there on, we've got the winter moisture and then spring and you've got a crop of wheat made and so that's the summer fallow system and that's a system that was predominantly between The Dalles and Gilliam County and Sherman, and Morrow, and Umatilla, LaGrande and then on the other side of the mountain where Harold and I worked.

[10:30]

HK: One of the newer innovations since we both kind of got out of that business, is what they call "chemical fallow." So rather than plow it in the spring or, they actually didn't plow very much anymore with a moldboard plow, they used a chisel plow, but

they quit doing that on thousands of acres now and spray it with chemicals that kills the weeds and then all they do it is spray it to kill the additional weeds at come up and then you can see right into what's an almost two-year-old stubble and the same experience, that stubble and the mulch on the surface protected the moisture and they are able to seed right back into the moisture under that previous crop. So, that was just starting. It's much more common now. There are a few problems with it, but it actually works pretty good.

One of the concerns about summer fallow system is the potential for erosion. You've got this bare ground and you get a hard thunderstorm or cloudburst or storm like we talked about in December of 1964, you have the potential for a lot of erosion and washing that soil off the fields and everybody's goal is to not let that happen and chemical fallow is a good way to prevent that.

So, anyhow, that was part of my learning curve in Morrow County. There was a lot of good training sessions in both states that Tom and I both went to regarding the latest things from the ag researchers which were headquarter up in the Horse Heaven Hills of Washington and the Columbia Basin station in Pendleton and another smaller station in Sherman County. And those researchers were both state employees and federal employees who were really some of the national leaders in wheat research.

[12:15]

One of the things that I think most people think about county agents is that you're always telling farmers about new things and things they ought to try. One of the roles I found in Morrow County was that I found myself often saying, "Guys, I don't think I'd do that; that doesn't make sense to what I know about growing wheat. I don't think the advice you got is absolutely the best." That was a little bit of an uncomfortable role to be in because often you were competing against a private industry person or sometimes it was a fly-by-night salesman that came through.

One time we had a guy come through selling us actually it was soil that came off of a mountain in Colorado that he claimed did miracle things in wheat fields. And this was

shipped in in box cars and the farmers were buying it and spreading it across the fields. And I called it foo-foo and that's all in the world it was; it wasn't doing a thing for the wheat field but because of the drought we were having, the lack of rainfall over a three or four-year period, their yields were getting terrible and they were searching for something to correct that. Well, foo-foo wasn't the right answer.

But one of the things that I tried in a different kind of way, was I talked to one of the young farmers who was well respected by his neighbors and I talked to him and said, "I'd like to take some soil samples of your summer fallow ground and see how much nitrogen you have in that ground to carry over from previous crops and see if you really need to apply an fertilizer." Well, everybody fertilized every year before they planted. I had one farmer that never used fertilizer, but the norm was that everybody put on some fertilizer and the fertilizer business was a key part of the local business. There was two companies selling fertilizer at a time and eventually a third one got into it and then it got back to just two. But they were recommending fertilizer on ground that had only produced less than 12 bushels last time it was in crop. So in knowing what I knew about wheat and fertilizer, there was no way that 12 bushel crop could have used all the fertilizer that was put on before.

So, I walked this 1,200 acre field and took samples and sent them in, paid for the analysis myself and went out one Saturday morning and caught the young farmer at his coffee table and said, "Here's the results of the soil test; you could produce 40 bushel wheat on this ground without putting any fertilizer on. There's plenty of nitrogen in the ground. He didn't really tell me whether he was going to do that or not, but he thanked me and kept the paperwork.

And I thought about Tom's story about news stories and you know, I could write this up, but I don't think that's the way to go because I'm going to stir up a lot of trouble here, and so I thought that young farmer talked to his neighbors and I knew he would do that in the poker games and wherever they got together, at the tavern, and I thought he's going to do a better job than a news story would do. And not knowing whether he had

taken my advice and not knowing what the results were, but at holiday time, Christmastime, that fall in the Elks Club, he walked over to me and he said, "Harold, I owe you a drink." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well, you saved me \$80,000 last year on my wheat field for not putting any fertilizer on." And so I got a \$2 drink out of it. (Laughter). But I made my point and it was the appropriate way to make it in that county with the situation as it was.

But there were other instances where you didn't always have the newest word. Salesmen were always trying to sell something and Morrow County didn't have a strong....Tommy had a strong fertilizer dealer, chemical salesman who was a part of the community. We had a fellow but he retired and then we really didn't have that kind of a situation for a while. And then the Morrow County Grain Growers got into the fertilizer business but the manager came to me one Sunday afternoon and he said, "I want to talk to you about fertilizer." And I said, "Okay, why are you interested?" And he said, "Well, we're going to get into the fertilizer business but we don't want to get into a fight with you." And I said, "Well, Larry, you won't as long as what you do kind of makes sense." He said, "Yeah, we're going to take your advice and not recommend the same amount on the fields." And so I felt in the long run that I got my job done there as an educator in the county.

[16:50]

TZ: Well, you know, when you talk about Extension agents, Extension faculty now, as we try to refer to it, because they are faculty members. Harold, I think, made a real key point for our faculty in the field. They had ranchers, Dave Childs was one in Gilliam County and K.C. Kotcge was another and a couple other ranchers, John Macminigal, I can name several who have said to me in public, "You know, you guys over the long run have saved us millions of dollars." In situations like Harold is talking about. \$80,000 in the case of one rancher, and not just, certainly not just Harold and I but I mean these things happen daily in these counties all over the state of Oregon whether it be herbicide that somebody wants to sell you and it's a new herbicide and it's one that's half the price that you...you know this is working, why pay this to work...it's not going to do any better? And that's where the ranchers or people would come to us and say,

“Okay, what about this new fertilizer, what about this new herbicide?” Well, right now our research says that it’s no better than this and you can get this for half the price so why pay \$130,000 for your herbicide this year when you only need to pay \$70,000 or \$60,000 or something like that.

And these situations occurred in the livestock industry, in cereals and horticulture all over the state and even basically all over the nation where you had good Extension faculty that were up to date on research and you had good research people that were providing you the data. The same way with wheat varieties. That’s another one. We had a great wheat breeder by the name of Warren Kronstad. And he probably single-handedly made more money for the wheat ranchers in this state and the state of Washington than any one single person ever did just by the varieties that he developed that increased the yields and kept us away from diseases.

[19:10]

Excuse me, Harold.

HK: No, whatever I was going to say I forgot. (Laughter). Happens to you after you’re retired. Anyhow, you very seldom had a wheat rancher come to you and say, “Well, boy you made me a lot of money this year.” But that was an instance where it did happen to me and over time you saw people that benefitted. They might not ever come and thank you they may not have even realized you were the reason they made the decision they made. I remember my point now – I always took that I was just another source of information. They had their parents, their father, their grandfather that was advising them. They had their banker advising them, chemical salesman that was advising them, the fertilizer salesman and I always looked at us as an unbiased source of information that they just listened to. And whether they did what we told them or not was not our problem, was not our issue. Many times you didn’t know if they followed your advice or not, but you might find out later that they did but you were giving them information. You had nothing at risk, you weren’t on one side or the other, you were right in the middle saying, “This is what OSU research says you should do.” That was

always a great backup and moral support for us as we spent our days in the field with those fellows.

[20:35]

HK: Another cute story that I want to relate. Was one winter we were going to have an ag chemical seminar and I the fellow, Don Riderick from the Pendleton Experiment station and I had about three chemical salesmen coming in to talk about their product. We were going to hold it at the Elks Club in Heppner and the day before it just snowed a fit and I'll tell you, we had 15 inches of snow at least all over everything. Well, Don called from Pendleton and said, "Harold, I can't get over there. The roads are terrible between here and Heppner."

And I thought, well, I promised them lunch and the chemical salesmen are going to pay for lunch, so I might get a few farmers in and I'll just send the bill to the chemical salesmen because they're not going to get here either. Well, those three guys, I don't know how they got there. Three different ways, three different companies. They all made it. You couldn't get through the Gorge because it was closed. But they went over through Salem, over the Santiam Pass and got around and one of them went up into Washington and got around. They all three made it and showed up about 11:00 o'clock and I thought, "Now what I'm going to do. I don't know if I'll have any farmers." Well, we completely filled the room and completely plugged up the town of Heppner because every wheat farmer had to see if they could get to down in their four-wheel drive pickup. They had the streets totally filled with pickups and had a great meeting and I gave the information that Don was going to give and you know, when you've got that kind of turnout, they came for the free food, but I think they came to hear what we had to say and so you got some feedback that way from those guys.

[22:10]

EU: It seems like a good example of the ties between the specialists in Corvallis, you in the office and then the farmers and ranchers in the field. Three legs or whatever of Extension is important.

TZ: We couldn't operate, really as well as we did without the specialists on campus and

from the Experiment Stations and particularly on the east side, the Experiment Stations were really important to us because we didn't see the specialists as much from Corvallis just because of time, distance and travel. There were some that did travel, that didn't bother them, but Harold mentioned Don Riderick, he was a researcher, but he really was our specialist in Central Oregon, in eastern Oregon in weed control at least. And then the ranchers you mentioned. But if you got a good reputable chemical dealer, he was as good as a specialist too if he was reputable and honest and if you got to know him and he got to know you and you develop a trust, you could really use those guys and rely upon them for certainly information about their product and they would level with them.

[23:35]

HK: When you're up in front of a group of farmers with three fierce competitors in the audience, they tell a different story than in a one-on-one situation and you got the straight scoop and it was, like you say, they were a great help to us and I learned a lot from those guys. Of course, they specialized in one product, but they knew their product and knew what it could do.

TZ: Well, and I would equate it to no different than, let's go into the medical profession and the doctor and the salesman comes in and he has different types of penicillin or whatever, represents a drug company so his is of course the best and here's what we've got on the market and this takes care of this. Well, so much of the time the doctor relies on that information. If they are a good reputable drug peddler and the same way with our chemical dealers or fertilizer supplier or whatever.

[24:30]

HK: Tom made a reference to the irrigation that when on in Morrow County. When I arrived there in '69 there were four center pivots. This is an irrigation system that travels in a circle and irrigates approximately 135 acres out of 160 quarter section. This is the corners because it's rounded and the one quarter section is square. But through that and long before the 13 years and the next six or seven years there were over 700 of those center pivot systems put in Morrow County and most of them were pumping from the river to the ground that had never been in wheat it was just desert soil that

responded magnificently when water and fertilizer was put on it. And some conditional farmers back farther south that drilled wells and irrigated and we become the number one potato producing county in the nation, shortly after we got into that in a big way and now they are more diversified. Still growing a lot of potatoes, but even fairly large acreages of hybrid poplars were planted to product chips for the wood industry and that's been a real questionable market up and down; they may get out of that, but there is some substantial acreage in that. A lot of alfalfa grown.

Recently they have announced that Boardman is the home of one of the ethanol producing plants in Oregon and I don't know what's going to happen up there because there's a demand for the hay, there's a demand for the potatoes and if they start growing a crop for that ethanol plant they are going to reduce the acreage of those other crops and this has happened nationwide. They are going to raise the price of food, maybe lower the price of fuel, but it doesn't look like very much and the ethanol production thing has way more problems than benefits at this point in my mind. If I was a county agent, I'd have a hard time supporting building ethanol plants.

[26:35]

EU: So, you've seen a lot of changes over the years, I mean with the crops have changed.

HK: Wheat is still king out there but boy, if you've got water, you can do a lot of other things and of course, barley is a substitute for wheat. Interesting, barley does better on poorer, dryer ground, dryer conditions, than wheat does. It's a more efficient crop. Produces more pounds of barley than wheat can produce pounds of wheat. But potatoes and corn, both sweet corn and field corn, alfalfa.

One of the changes in Morrow County is that there is now over 30,000 dairy cows in Morrow County producing cheese for Tillamook and that's another big demand on those acres of irrigated ground, to produce the feedstuff for those milk cows.

EU: So all of Tillamook Cheese doesn't all come from

HK: Doesn't all come from Tillamook.

TZ: It comes from Tillamook, but through a circuitous route.

EU: Not Tillamook cows, huh?

TZ: Right. Not happy cows from California or from Tillamook.

TZ: When you mentioned change, I think you're right. You know when you go back to the '40s, the only thing they grew in these areas these were dry were dry land wheat and that's why the summer fallow system was developed because they didn't have a choice. They didn't have the moisture, couldn't turn on the faucet and make it rain or whatever. Now they can turn on the faucet in a lot of these areas where they were pumping water out. So then that just changes dynamics of cropping. Like Harold said, well, they started out with potatoes and sugar beets. Sugar beets at one time were really big up in that area and the sugar beet factory in Washington, Wenatchee I think, went out of business, so sugar beets kind of went down and then alfalfa and potatoes and now you're talking about the hybrid poplars. Why we would have thought that was really weird but when you drive along 84 going to Pendleton you see thousands of acres of hybrid poplars.

EU: I've often wondered what those trees were.

TZ: And so you know, whatever is going to happen, as far as the market, and these folks have the ability to get in because they've got the water and they've got the temperature and they've got the sun. And then the changes in cereal varieties is always changing. Herbicides are changing...pesticides; whatever. So there's a lot of changes but there's been some monumental changes when you get water.

HK: Of course, that's not without controversy. There are people who think we shouldn't be taking the water out of the Columbia River for irrigation, so...

[29:25]

EU: Could you talk a little bit about corporate farms and has that been one of the changes?

[29:25]

HK: Those big farms in northern Morrow County around Boardman were all corporate ventures. Sometimes two or three private individuals forming a corporation, known as Saber farms, another instance of one family farming a farm called Eastern Oregon Farms. The biggest one is actually, it's quite a complicated thing. The land is actually owned by the State of Oregon, it's leased to Boeing Company and then two partners, Pete DeGaris and J. R. Simplot formed Simtag Farms and they farm substantial acreage. That's now where the dairies are so those people are involved in that land too and I didn't view them as a threat to the family farm. They had the access to resources, to financing, they could hire their own private county agents and you know that land probably would never have been developed any other way.

[30:30]

TZ: Was that part of the Boardman bombing range?

HK: No, the bombing range is still there. There's 50,000 acres that's controlled by the Navy as a practice bombing range and that's still desert; surrounded now by irrigated fields, at least on three sides. That someday, might become available but maybe not. There's still more acres out there that can be developed and irrigated and we had a project related to Tom's research plots where we were going to build a canal that would take water back about 12 or 13 miles to an elevation of about 1,100 feet and then private farmers could buy water from that canal distribution system and irrigate dry land wheat ground. We collected 25 cents an acre from the affected landowners and did a

fairly intensive economic development feasibility study and decided it was just borderline whether it would work. If we decided it would work where would the financing come from? It would have taken huge amounts of money to do that. The government wasn't likely to come up with it; the farmers weren't likely to commit to that kind of debt and so we said it was feasible but at this point not economical. Now, if food costs keep going up and wheat went from \$4 a bushel to \$10 a bushel this last year because of this corn ethanol problem and if those crop prices remain and there's a worldwide shortage, they could afford to irrigate that dry land ground.

TZ: Like the Shutler Flat irrigation project that we talked about earlier where I developed the research plots for the Shutler Flat was specifically in Gilliam County and pumping out of the Columbia River. It was quite a pump – 600-800 feet, I suppose, 900 in some cases to pump it up to the top of the flat. Well, it was feasible but the ranchers wouldn't want to commit. Wheat was \$1.25 a bushel thing. Wheat, at \$10 a bushel now, I can't help but believe that they wish they would have. But here you go, you don't have the wherewithal or the money so what do you do. So probably some farms we talked about if they signed up and wanted to go they would have gone bankrupt. Some of them would have survived and they would have had water. Somebody would have profited by it but that's an investment one way or the other, a great challenge.

EU: Let's take a break. This is the end of Part 4.

[33:17]