

LEE RISSE ON AGRICULTURE (excerpts from his 14 Feb. 2001 interview)

..... Krueger had the greenhouse....¹ He bought the boiler from Independent Lumber or somebody and he built this greenhouse, and the first tomato plants I bought from him, he jerked 'em out of the ground and wrapped 'em up in newspaper and gave 'em to me and I'd never seen anything like that.... Charlie Shrewsbury had 'em in beer cans. He started 'em in beer cans. We did some tomatoes in beer cans, too, and I picked up all the beer cans from that Club Car on the Steese Highway....

L: Oh, I didn't remember (*Betschard*). All I heard about, when you come down the hill from Severns, he had a strawberry patch out there and a raspberry patch and I guess he was just one of these guys that tried to exist off the land.....

Carl grew some stuff, too. In 1953 was the first time I met Carl Herning. He had potatoes on his place up there and I came up and helped my sister and her husband get a house under roof. And they only had X number of dollars and we expended all their money they had at the time and I still had a couple more days of vacation..... Everybody wanted someone to help pick up potatoes so Howard Arndt, who was in the service, he took 26 days off when we was doin' this house and we went out and picked up potatoes. Well, Carl had two young guys there that were haulin' in as we were pickin' 'em up. Well, at five o'clock these guys went home and Carl had potatoes out in the field and they shinnied around the corner and Carl says, "Where're the Tillman boys?" I said, "Well, they left at 5 o'clock." And somebody said, "All I saw was the taillights as they were leaving." So we were out in the dark trying to pick up potatoes, you know, with potato vines all everywhere, and, if you don't think that was—somebody holdin' the flashlight, tryin' to find where the bags were and you know, we fumbled around out there in the dark Harold came over afterwards and we went out and got all of 'em in.... We went over first thing in the morning to see if we left one somewhere, because it was freezing that night.

Then Carl was driving bus already so he dug a couple rows before he went on the bus route. Well, Carl was a fussy guy about who drove his equipment.... And it was really funny, this Arndt, he grew up on a farm in Wisconsin and he ran more farm machinery than Carl ever saw, so we picked up those potatoes, then he dug four more rows and Carl come back and he said, "W-h-o d-r-o-v-e m-y t-r-a-c-t-o-r?" We said, well, we were out of potatoes.I think we picked 170 bags of potatoes that day. And those two kids came in the morning and we helped 'em load so we weren't out there fumblin' in the dark. We put ninety pounds in the bags, that's what he wanted. You could still kinda get a hold on the bags but that was about all. John Holmes and all those other guys only put one of those big baskets in each bag and that way whoever was doing it, their kids, or Edith or John, could lift 'em, with only one basket in a bag.

A: Yeah, but the bucket (*on a little Oliver tractor*) was the narrow one. It didn't go out beyond the edge of the tracks, so you were always fightin' that.....

¹ Krueger lived between 5 and 5 1/2 mile Chena Hot Sp. Rd.

L: Oh, the crooked business.....² The guy over at Mitchell Truck and Tractor said, "Well, it's better than a No. 2, but not much."³ Anyway, Don had a piece of equipment, too, and Frank Fassler bought one and that thing only had three rollers on the bottom and if you got on uneven ground the track would just walk off and for about a half a day you'd be out there jacking and trying to put it back on. Charlie Ward got one of the first John Deere's that John Deere made. NC was selling them and Charlie Ward was promoting the John Deere thing at the time..... Then Yukon Equipment was handling a thing called Terra Trak (*sp*) and that was the forerunner to the Case Company makin' a crawler tractor. Well, the John Deere had individual clutches for each side on the tracks so you could theoretically turn this thing, stop the one, disengage the clutch and if you pulled the lever back, you pulled the brake and that would stop the thing completely and you could turn it. Well, the Terra Trak had a planetary gear in it and all it had was a brake and you could brake on the one side and then the other side would gradually turn..... It wasn't as neat. John Deere was in the business longer on this crawler stuff so they had learned a lot of improvements.....

Carl Herning at one time bought a combine from someone..... Don had planted some grain on his acreage over there and it looked beautiful and when I was doing my proving up....., Walt Eberhardt had a grain drill from somewhere, I don't know if it was Charlie Ward's or what, but we planted barley over at my place because that was the only kind of grain anybody had around here at the time and Lynn Funk got the barley off the place and it made over 70 bushels to the acre, which was kind of an unheard of thing. I was just happy to see somebody utilize it.... Right after we harvested that crop, I was able to get 'em to come and look to make sure we'd done our (*proving up*)..... I went to the Soil Conservation Service and they went out and took a wheel and measured all these pieces of ground to make sure I had it and when the BLM came out, they looked out the window and said, "Looks like there's enough there." And they signed it off and went home.

L: (*Lynn Funk's place*) went all the way back in there. He got more than that straight shot in there. I think he went more down toward that creek (*Steele Creek*). I was down there one time and I thought, "Oh, how glad I am to be on the hill." Anyway, he went in there and he had a whole bunch of cows in there and the water was so bad that everything was brown, the cans on the outside were brown. You know, all these guys were out here tryin' to get this agriculture thing goin' and he had cows and a guy on the Steese here—Bushey, and Horace Drury. Horace Drury had 320 acres back off of Freeman there. (*All were dairying.*)

We went out there one time, we saw his place and he had a chopper for hay silage and they delivered their milk out to Matanuska out at the creamery and there was a guy out on Chena Pump Rd. that had cows in those railroad cars. They had railroad cars down on Chena Pump Rd. at one time. I can't think of the guy's name. He had more milk than some of the other ones. Then Gadbury had a farm out here off Badger Road and they all brought their milk to the Matanuska Creamery, to the Co-op. See, the Co-op built that creamery here, primarily to sell milk to the military, then they had the refrigeration up here and everything so they made ice cream... out of butterfat and

² Refers to action of an Oliver tractor

³ A No. 2 shovel, that is

powdered milk and stabilizer and the ice cream was good quality and they sold a lot of it and Carnation came in and made a deal with Art Sexauer (*who*) was the distributor for Carnation⁴ and he was a real good friend of one of the pilots for Pan American and he got a little preferential treatment haulin' milk and they hauled milk up here for 8 cents a pound on them airlines. They would bring up fifteen or twenty thousand pounds a night 'cause they were comin' up with a 747 and they'd park their milk trucks out there and they'd off-load it and put it in the trucks.....and take it to the cooler. Their trucks would be loaded in the morning and they could deliver the milk. They didn't even have to warehouse it, sometimes..... This was about 1958, when I went to work there, then in 1959 I got fired. I smiled when the boss came in with two black eyes..... I worked at the University until then. Hal Hume was working down at Matanuska Creamery and he was gonna go to college and there was an opening down there, so I went down and applied and I got the job. D

During the course of the summer, the manager quit and went to work for the city—Dar Heine was the manager down there--because he was a chemist by going to school at the University of Michigan, or whatever, and the city needed somebody at the water treatment plant. Also he did the tests on the coal, how many BTU's the coal had. So that job at the creamery was only an interim job. Then the Co-op sent up one of the sons from the board of directors down there to be the interim manager. Well, he was a really good _____ operator, but he wasn't a manager. And I went to all the trouble to make the inventory up for him and he'd just arbitrarily order whatever he felt like. So, I always had an opportunity to change about fifty cases of milk out of that little dinky cooler and put the new in. They got milk three times a week and everyday, every time we got milk in, I'd have to haul these out, put 'em on a cart, put the new in and set the others ones on top. Back and forth in there. And then we had cardboard boxes at that time, so we had to lay plywood on the boxes in each layer so they didn't mash down and the waxy cartons leaked half the time and then if they leaked we'd put it back into the milk and re-pasteurize it because they couldn't sell a leaker.....

B: Did you know Dr. Fitz?

L: I only met him one time. I went over to Bert Stimple's place and I met Dr. Fitz. This Dr. Fitz was a missionary in China, I believe.... He was a real good, non-alcoholic person and Bert Stimple was full of it all the time. So, one time, Dr. Fitz had some potatoes and he agreed to get somebody over to help dig 'em.... Bert Stimple and somebody else went over and they got a couple hundred beer cans and they buried them in the row and when they started diggin' 'em, here come beer cans out of the thing, you know. Everybody's over watchin' this demonstration of this new potato digger and here Dr. Fitz didn't drink anything. But they did that kind of stuff.... And Bert Stimple, they went into one of his rows and he was gonna show how much he got and they had rogued out all the potatoes that they could reach and they'd very carefully mounded the dirt again and fortunately it had drizzled a little bit so it looked.... Well, they started diggin' and there wasn't a peanut for the first forty or fifty feet. They had rogued 'em all out of there.

⁴ Al thinks Art Sexauer was making Carnation ice cream from dried up until this time. ???

B: And who was responsible for this?

L: I think that was the Mad Russian, Zozula. Because she (*Mrs. Zozula*) worked over there raisin' potatoes for him.... Cora Gamble helped, too. And they rigged up a bucket of water and when they went into Bert's root cellar, water dumped on their head. They said it wasn't for them, it was in case somebody broke in a stole potatoes. And I think Zozula and, I'm not sure who, got wet. They got back at Bert,... but it took a little while.

B: Well, when did Bennet go in?

L:I don't know exactly. I just knew that old Bennet was up there and I went up there one time and he was a grumpy old turkey and he wouldn't pay very much because Ann and somebody went and picked potatoes for him one time and they didn't go back.

Well, the Matanuska Creamery bought out the Farmer's Co-op, after while, that building, and the only reason they bought that building was they was gonna bring up their potatoes from Palmer and sell.....

The farmers would all put in a bid how much they wanted to sell their potatoes for and then the Co-op would put in a bid on the average, then if someone wanted to sell at the price they were setting, the Co-op would accept them. And some of 'em would have a real low bid. Now Carl (*Herning*) he kept thinking they were gonna pay \$8 a hundred for 'em.... Walt didn't seem to mind what the price was because he worked forty-eight hours a week or more all the time.....

L: Well, Krueger had this greenhouse..... I don't think it supported him but occasionally Carl had him do some stuff for him. I think he just did busy work for him.

B: What kind of fuel did he use (*for the greenhouse*).

L: Oh, he had wood. He had a big old boiler... and he also burned coal. They got a stoker in there afterwhile..... It seemed like that greenhouse was about 24'x24'. Well, you know Carl used to raise quite a few vegetables..... Krueger raised radishes for Carl. Carl had the ground and Krueger would do the radishes and they sold 'em to the military. I remember in 1953 and 1954, they did a lot of 'em, they sold a pile of them. They had thos wire-bound baskets and they'd have those things full of radishes and they sold them in 25 pound bags to the restaurants. And they did zucchini. The guys who got zucchini on the market first got about 50 cents a pound for it and they sold it for 79 in the store. Then when it went down to 39, they got 25 cents a pound for it. Gasoline was 28 cents a gallon or something and a pickup wasn't much. Lindstrand sold a fair amount of wood.....

I was in to his place, and I tell you what, I was in there in the spring and I thought I had mud at my place but he had a lot more. We went in there and took that tractor and had a go-devil and that's how we got to the root cellar and the water was about this deep all over, we drove through this water to get to the root cellar, the root cellar was

up high enough that the water didn't run in. He had certified seed potatoes..... In the summer there's some nice ground down in there, there were a lot of other people had homesteads down in that area.... They had big hayfields..... and a little bit beyond that, Johnson Rd. there, we found peat up on the hillside there, up on top of the hill beyond Johnson Rd. We were huntin' peat because we were biddin' on a job at Eielson and we were tryin' to figure out where we'd get peat from.... Miller, Alaska Truck Crane Rental, had a bunch of land out there, one thing over from Van Horn, big old gravel pit in there. He had a lot of soil in there that was pretty nice lookin' stuff, with some peat mixed in it. If you run it through a blender it looked like choice merchandise, you know, and it worked pretty good. It had just enough sand in it so that it wasn't sticky and not much clay..... We went down lookin' at it because we were tryin' to figure some way to bid on it..... ended up, whoever got the job that time, just took the existing material down in that area, so we never did pursue that thing, too much.

B: This was after you were in the landscaping business?

L: Well, I did a little bit, you know. Well, the greenhouse thing, I was sellin' to Holmes. By the first or tenth of June, we had everything delivered to 'em, we didn't have anything at home and the only thing we did, we did our garden stuff. One year, we went overboard, we did six, almost 7000 cauliflower plants. I sold most of 'em to Safeway. When I tried to sell stuff to Safeway.....the guy said, "Well, you'll have to talk to the manager." So I talked to the manager and the guy said, "Well, give me ten good reasons why we should buy from you." And I said, "Oh, I can do better than that." I had 42 checks written out to Safeway, most of 'em in the \$100 category. I bought groceries about once amonth and I had a lot of checks.....so then it wasn't so hard to break in.

.....Well, about the time I went to work for Consolidated, I didn't have time to do this greenhouse thing so one year I was still doing stuff so I made a deal with Russ Wood, or Mrs. Russ Wood, and I said, "You guys got your foot in the door. I'll give you a billing book and you put it on a separate billing book, write it up like it's yours and then just take 20% off when they pay you." She said, "That's too much." And I said, "No, it isn't. That's what you gotta get." So, I made the agreement and after awhile she said that was good, it helped them get into the store with a few more items..... But I'll never forget the guy that was the produce buyer at Safeway about that time, he said "We've finally got a guy can bring in zucchini as nice as yours." I said, "Oh, I must have showed somebody how to do it."... So, one night he's out at Russ Wood's and I'm delivering zucchini squash..... Well, you see, I had so many zucchini squash, I could only pick out the choice ones. I threw the other ones on the side of the garden because it looks so nice when they're all uniform and people are a little bit pleased if you can give them a quality product every time. In order for me to get into the store, I sometimes would have to take their old crummy ones that were wilted and everything else, put 'em on the scale, throw 'em in the garbage and give 'em other ones. Then I'd have mine in there and then they would sell. You had to work at it in order to.....

. And potatoes, when they hauled 'em to the military—George Dornath had a truck belonged to Dan Hartman. Dan Hartman had a flat bed truck that he bought one time from somebody. He loaned somebody money sometime and the guy couldn't pay so he

got this truck. George Dornath used to use furniture pads and he'd line that truck with furniture pads and they'd stack the potatoes in and they'd cover over with furniture pads and then over the very top of the truck they'd put a tarp. And then they'd deliver out to Wainwright or Eielson..... They'd back the truck in and off-load it, one bag at a time. Nothing was palletized because no one had a forklift at that time..... They accepted potatoes five ton at a time..... Most of the time with five ton on the truck, he was overloaded but they delivered mostly in the winter, and hardly ever the scale was open and I don't know that they ever stopped anybody.....

L: Carl (*Herning*) had his own root cellar and I washed potatoes in 5 gallon barrels.....

.....Hempel was a produce guy, too. Hempel is right there... on Farmers' Loop.... Hempel's homestead..... was right there. I went out there one time and you know, they had onions, green onions they were growin' there in that field and they must have had two or three hundred bunches, that particular day when we were out there, neat little onions, hotter than blazes, but they were pretty. And they were growin' 'em out there in the field.

John Holmes must have had a quarter acre of tomatoes one year. He bought tomato seed from every imaginable place and he had, I don't know if he had ten acres of cabbage one year, but he raised cabbage for the military and Dornath hauled it..... They sold a bunchand he watered that, they pumped water out of Columbia Creek.... Henry Gettinger's father-in-law (*Max Douglas*) had that homestead there where that gas trial thing is, (*on Columbia Creek*) and they were growing radishes about where all that test site is,and they had a little radish harvester. It would dig the little things out to the top, then you'd stop the thing and get a bunch off and put a rubber band on...as you were diggin' 'em, and it was good if you didn't have wormy ones.....but they'd put four or five extra ones in, then they'd just pinch off the bad one and I remember them grading them too.

Henry worked for the Co-op for awhile. He was their sales person, delivering potatoes to the different stores.... I don't know if it was the Matanuska Co-op that he was workin' for or if it was the other one.... The Co-op also sold a lot of feed at one time, for the people who had cows and chickens. I remember having to go out to the warehouse, here we are, workin' in the ice cream plant, and then somebody'd have to go get a bag of feed out of there and you carried it away from your body so you didn't get any of the mash that was comin' out of the holes, into the ice cream.....

And the revolving loan fund... was supposed to help people in agriculture but it just put some of them in such a bind that they hardly got out of it. Most of the time people didn't realize the cost of financing things, then the wisdom of the Department of Agriculture wanting milk parlors for four or five cows, or twenty, and having stainless steel. We grew up in a country where they had milk cans and they set the cans in cold water and they run cold water over 'em and cooled 'em off, and a lot of people made cheese out of it and it was good.....

When I got fired down there, I told one of the guys on the board down there in Palmer, "If you leave that guy up there, your doors are gonna go shut," and they didn't believe me. Because he would buy cottage cheese and instead of getting it on Wednesday, he'd get it on Saturday. If it didn't get in, by Monday the military didn't want to buy it. When Heine was there and that happened, he'd go down to Lindy's and say, "Hey, I'll give you this cottage cheese at X number of dollars." But this guy instead of doing that, if they couldn't get full price at the stores, after the expired date, it'd go in the garbage. Zozula fed four pigs on cottage cheese one year.....

B: This was a relative of one of the board, you said?

L: Yeah, he was the son one of the board of directors down there. I talked to another one down there and I told him, "Some people are goin' say I was a disgruntled guy because he fired me. I didn't get fired because I didn't do my work. His excuse was that I was selling produce and wasn't selling it through the Co-op." I sold a few boxes of potatoes for people who wouldn't buy Alaska potatoes. I'd give 'em a box of potatoe, I forget, I think it was thirty pounds, I think I charged 'em three dollars or something. I said, "You don't pay for 'em (*now*). If you like 'em, you pay me for 'em. If you don't like 'em you don't pay me. And I got paid for every one of 'em. But I promoted Alaska potatoes. In 1953, they had Alaska potatoes—I tell you what, you could put it in a pan without water and drain water off of it.... The Knik one was the worst one.... If you had that waterless cookware, you could cook 'em in there and it'd be a little bit like flour and water.... I remember Mattie Lee Herning cooking some. They fixed us a meal when we were digging potatoes and those potatoes were pretty sticky. They got better, specially those that were grown on higher ground.

.....Ford had a big homestead at North Pole and his potatoes were so full of scab that you couldn't see the potato. It was in the ground out there. Walt Eberhardt had a little patch in one of his fields, where the water got caught, from a burn pile, and right below that there were some scabby potatoes. On our hill over there, it all drains down the hill and we've never had a scabby potato. I've always used certified seed, except the first couple years when I didn't know about certified seed.....

I'll never forget, they were takin' those potatoes in the root cellar and the motor had quit on that conveyer and they brought out a new motor for that Ford guy, and they put this other motor on and it was a 34 hundred instead of 17 hundred. That belt went so fast that it, ever so often it went phsshttt, phsshttt (*throwing potatoes*).... It rubbed the scab right off. Those healed over and you could hardly see they had scab on 'em. He had about 12 or 15 ton in that one bin and they just looked like someone had rolled 'em across the yard. You know how you take a new potato... and you go like this and all the skin rubs off? That's the way they all looked in there and after a while when they healed, he managed to get rid of those..... Walt and I couldn't even lift our (*sacks?*) when we were watching this... (*because they were laughing*).

.....when it warmed up, we (*Lee and Walt Eberhardt*) would get a whole load out of the garage quick, put it on this old Dodge he had sittin' in his yard, old Kismet, it's a 1937 Dodge, and we loaded that thing up as high as the rack and to town we went. And Williams Const. was working on the Steese Highway, at the Farmers' Loop

connection. Well, they wanted us to drive clear around by McGrath and Walt says, "I'm goin' through there, anyway." Well, old Williams was over there they were haulin' gravel in dump trucks and they were baling the gravel⁵, and then it would smash down into the box (*of the dump truck*). When they'd go to pick 'em up like that, sometimes it wouldn't slide out. They had one (*truck*) sittin' up in the sky when we went by. Old Williams had a shovel in his hand and came over toward Walt like he was gonna smash the window in on the truck and Walt shook his fist at him and drove on by. He put it in third gear and went tearin' through that loose gravel and down to the root cellar we went.....

And then there was...Joe Lawler... lived out there off Miller Hill. He was into this farming thing at one time.....

A: Yup. He got a job with division of lands.

L: He offered me some land on Bradway Rd. one time, and we went out there and we didn't know which side of the road it was on..... It was water up to the road on both sides of the road so we didn't know where the land was. That land was...\$27 an acre at that time, but I didn't have a boat so I didn't buy it.

⁵ gravel was "baled" from the pit was wet, therefore packed and resisted sliding