

Interview with  
Robert L. Kirk, Sr.  
by  
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Lynn Haessly: Well, what I've been interested in, Mr. Kirk, is finding out about the history of dairy farms. So if you would first tell me a little bit about when you were born and where you grew up and talk about that if you will.

Robert Kirk: Well, I was born and raised here on this plantation. I was born in 1922.

LH: What was the date?

Kirk: July the 28th, 1922. My daddy started the dairy farm when I was just ten years old.

LH: What had he done before?

Kirk: He was a general farmer, a farming man. He was in service, got married--was in service came home and got married. This was a family farm before he bought his brothers out on this farm. When the farm was a dairy farm. We been in the dairy business. We been in the dairy business I guess since I was eleven years old--ever since I can remember.

LH: How many cows did you start out with?

Kirk: Well, we set out with a little barn and we milked four cows. We had I guess twelve or fifteen cows or so. We sold sweet milk, I mean we separated it with an old separator, separated the cream from the milk. Had a little barn over about 200 yards from the house. The milk room was at the house. We'd bring the milk on back to the house and separate it, run it through an old separator.

LH: Now did you have electric separator?

Kirk: No, it was hand, turned it by hand. We had an icebox kept it cool. I believe we'd carry it to town, about twice, three times a week to Durham. We'd carry it over to Durham to Waverly Ice Cream. That was when you'd get ice cream made out of pure cream. Then I guess it went on til I was 18 years old. No, I wasn't that old. Started to milk 25 cows. Sold whole milk. Whole milk went over to the old Long Meadow plant over in Durham. Was three or four neighbors right around. One would carry it one day, one the next day.

LH: How many people were milking at that time?

Kirk: Well, it was just the family.

LH: And who was that?

Kirk: That's my dad and three, four boys. He had four boys and one girl.

LH: Did your mom milk?

Kirk: Well, all the boys milked, either in the morning or the evening one.

LH: And the girl?

Kirk: No, the girl didn't do any milking. She stayed in the house. Well, she wasn't old enough to do it when we got into it, she's 20 years younger than I am.

LH: Did she do any of the work with the, with processing milk after you milked?

Kirk: She did.

LH: Did she?

Kirk: Her mother . . . she may have helped her mother clean up the milk room after we got through separating. It's been so long I can't remember. Then you got the growing family dairy, larger and larger. I guess we built the second barn, I don't remember the date. We put in ten stalls, stanchions to milk the cows. Then we put in the milking machine. Put the milkers on the cows and milk in a bucket and carry it into the house. Had an old cooler, an aerator cooler. Run it through and cool it. Put it in the icebox. We had took [inaudible] that helped cool it.

LH: Now, were those milkers run with electricity?

Kirk: They were electricity.

LH: But you still had an icebox for cooling, not refrigeration?

Kirk: Well, we did for a while. But we went along [ ] with cooling water [ ] You had water.

LH: Do you remember when electricity came through?

Kirk: I can't remember the date.

LH: Do you remember it as an event?

Kirk: Oh, yes.

LH: Can you tell me about that?

Kirk: Well, the university service run them line out as far as Orange Grove out there at the corner. Then they came round and got people to sign up for it and pay so much. . . . They talked to us, to get it to run our--it had come up about a mile out the road. It cost us 300 dollars. My daddy had to think a while before he'd spend 300 dollars to

have power. We'd visit the neighbors down there--they had a radio. We kept on on him til finally we got the power. Our dairy farm was the end of the line at that time.

LH: So it was the kids wanting radio rather than thinking about what he could use electricity for?

Kirk: Well, we wanted a refrigerator so we could make ice cream.

LH: It wasn't thinking about what he could use for the farm.

Kirk: Oh yes. Sure it was. It wasn't but a few years after we got electricity in that barn and the house that the milkers in the barn were put in and we got a milk tank, it cooled the milk and put in a pipeline. I think it was five or six years. Another fact was we put in a tank, which after we put in a tank we still milked in the old buckets a while. The dates I can't remember. I can't hardly keep up with my birthday. (chuckles)

LH: How did you, who was it who decided to go into the mechanical milking?

Kirk: My daddy. He still owned it. He turned it over to us--oh in '41 I'd guess to three, two of us boys. We bought out the other two and they went somewhere else.

LH: What did the other two go to do?

Kirk: Well, one of 'em went into dairy business, the other one to the chicken business, raises chickens and hogs.

LH: So they stayed in farming but there wasn't enough income on this farm?

LH: And his middle name?

Kirk: How's that?

LH: What's his middle name?

Kirk: Merritt.

LH: M-E?

Kirk: R-R-I-Double T.

LH: And then the next one after that?

Kirk: The next one is Arnold Kirk. Now I don't know either one of those birthdays.

LH: Well, that's OK.

Kirk: I know Arnold was born in December, but what year, I don't know.

LH: And your sister?

Kirk: Decie May.

LH: That's D-E?

Kirk: D-E-C-I-E.

LH: And then your parents' names?

Kirk: My dad was John Wesley Kirk, Sr.

LH: And your mother?

Kirk: Lola.

Martha Kirk: Lola Nell.

LH: That was her family name, her maiden name?

Kirk: Lola Nell Lloyd before she was married.

LH: Lloyd--there's still Lloyds around here.

Kirk: Yes, there's Lloyds around here, but they're not related to her set of Lloyds. She was raised from here this neighborhood.

LH: Do you know what years your parents were born?

Kirk: I can find out, I can look it up.

LH: When were they married? Probably right after the war?

Kirk: 19 and 18.

LH: Well, that's something we can look up later. Maybe we can go now and talk about when the farm got turned over to your brother and you. How old was your dad then, do you remember, about how old he was?

Kirk: 55.

LH: So he was a little bit of an older man when he was married.

Kirk: When he got married. He had been in service.

LH: How did he make the decision then?

Kirk: I don't know. [short chuckle] We were just all there and one day he said, "Y'all want to run it now, I'm gonna sell it." [short chuckle] We'd been running it all the time, just all along. [inaudible] and now we're milking 200 cows parlor seven stalls on each side pipeline

LH: How long does it take to milk?

Kirk: It takes about two hours in the parlor. About three hours in the barn.

LH: Three hours besides that?

Kirk: No, three hours, feeding and everything else. That's six hours a day in the barn.

LH: Now, if you think back to when your family first started into the dairy business when you were a boy, what amount of time was spent in the barn each day then?

Kirk: Oh, couple hours.

LH: So the amount of time has increased just a little bit. . . .

Kirk: Oh, yes.

LH: . . . but you milk so many more cows.

Kirk: The volume has increased tremendously.

LH: And you milk more cows because of more technology.

Kirk: Equipment.

LH: But it took you two hours to milk--what was it--ten cows?

Kirk: Well, it'd take about an hour and a half, probably an hour and a half. We milked 'em by hand. Then we built another barn after we started and put sixteen stanchions in. That speeded up milking a lot. And have five hands. We started off with three. And we added two more when we went into sixteen stanchions in the milking barn. And we had a pipeline, had to put in a pipeline for the milk. And I guess we were milking 70 cows in that barn.

LH: When do you think that would have been?

Kirk: After we got married. we didn't have a parlor when we got married.

Martha Kirk: You were milking by hand when we got married.

Kirk: Not by hand when we got married. We were milking in the--she don't do milking. She stays in the house. [chuckle] Weeelllll, I guess one the reasons she didn't know, my brother and I were in together. We had hired help. The women just never did come to the milking barn.

LH: Was that true of your mother, too?

Kirk: Yeah, my mother didn't go to the milking barn. She may have come over there, she may have once in a while but very seldom did she come after the boys got big.

LH: Now some of the other families we've talked to in the area do have their women involved in the milking.

Kirk: Yeah. Well, they are just single families. Now this is a double family. I guess if we'd been a single family here, she'd'a been over there, too, more than likely. Both of us [brothers] have hired help.

LH: How many hired hands--when did you first hire hands?

Kirk: Oh, my daddy hired one once in a while to help out--hay time, things like that. Regular hired hand, I think it was after we took over.

LH: So that would have been after World War II?

Kirk: Oh, yes, in '40, '39, '38, '39. Increased on from there.

LH: So the biggest increase in dairying came right around 1940?

Kirk: 1940, '41. But it kept on increasing.

LH: Did you serve in the war then?

Kirk: Well, I went--They took every boy in this community at one time, down to Fort Bragg, gathered all of us. Didn't leave anybody but my dad at home. Took the three of us boys. All of us passed. Got back, we got deferred. They deferred the dairy farmers.

LH: Did that work out for the other boys in the community?

Kirk: Yes. See, Arnold, my youngest brother, he quit the dairy farming before the war. They took him. He went in service. My oldest brother, he quit dairy farming. That leaves two of us that didn't go.

Martha Kirk: Your daddy was in service.

Kirk: She knows that, she's got that.

LH: How did you decide which ones of the boys were going to take over the farm? How did you decide?

Kirk: We were the two that took interest in it and worked on it. The other two didn't really care about it.

LH: Why were you interested in it?

Kirk: I don't know. [pause] Just suited me. They didn't care for it. Too much work for 'em, I guess. I really don't know why. [pause] One of 'em worked a while, then he decided he wanted a dairy by hisself. My daddy and us decided, got together, give him some cows, paid him so much money, helped him start his dairy. That was after he came out of service and came back to the farm. Within about a year, he wanted out on his own.

LH: When did you get married?

Kirk: Married in '44.

LH: So it was during wartime. [pause] Now your brother that you worked with, who was a little bit younger than you, did you ever have any questions about whether the farm could support two families at the same time?

Kirk: No. [pause] About four families right now. Merritt's got a son.

LH: Kenny?

Kirk: Supports four now. We got three, 'cause Arnold . . . .

LH: What time of day did you milk when you were a boy?

Kirk: When we were a boy, we started at about 5 in the morning.

LH: And you milked before school.

Kirk: Yeah.

LH: And you finished up . . . and got back to the house?

Kirk: Well, I drove a school bus, after I get done milking, I had to leave by 7:30. For many years I drove a school bus, when I was in high school.

LH: And then what time did you milk in the evening?

Kirk: It was about the same time in the evening, started about 5.

LH: And what about now?

Kirk: Well, we start about 3:30 in the morning now. About 3:30 in the evening. Well, we start about 2:30 now

with the time change [from daylight to standard time the previous weekend].

LH: Why do you start so early, compared to before?

Kirk: The milk hauler. Picks up the milk. A lot of times he's there waiting for us before we get through with it. You have to have it cool before he can take it. I guess his route is where he gets to us, he gets over to the barn about 7 o'clock, 7:30.

LH: Now I lived on a farm in Israel for a while, and they milked three times a day. And I didn't know if that was just something that they did in Israel, or if that was some kind of new practice.

Kirk: New practice.

LH: What's the reason?

Kirk: A few farmers around here milk three times a day.

LH: What's the reason for that?

Kirk: They claim they get more milk. I've always figured it costs more feed. Milk three times a day, takes more help, more hours in the barn.

LH: How many hands do you have now?

Kirk: Got one full time.

LH: So there's one full-time hand, two sons of the two brothers working full time.

Kirk: Three.

LH: Three sons?

Kirk: I got one and Merritt's got two.

LH: So there's six people working full time. And you keep your own books?

Kirk: No, we got a bookkeeper in Raleigh, a farm management man. We don't have time to keep books, so we hire it out.

LH: And how much land do you have?

Kirk: More than six hundred acres.

LH: How much did your dad have?

Kirk: About three hundred.

LH: So you've bought up more land. What else do you plant?

Kirk: We plant corn, small grain, a little sorghum and a few soybeans.

LH: Mainly for your own use?

Kirk: Own use. We're all self-supporting. We grow all our own feed except protein. Buy soybeans.

LH: When did your family first come to live on this land? Was your daddy the first one?

Kirk: No. His daddy before him.

LH: Do you know the history of when they came here?

Kirk: I might be able but. I told them I was going to retire and do a few things I wanted to. I think

LH: Why do you think you worked so hard this year?

Kirk: I don't know. It's been a crushing year. The weather keeps you, it seems it changes so much or something. The time comes to do something you've got to get out there

and do it. There's just been more to do, we got more cows, plant more land. We rent a lot of land, too.

LH: Rent it out to other people?

Kirk: No, we rent it from other people. We got three or four farms down around .

LH: What kind of crops did your dad grow?

Kirk: I think about the same things.

LH: Now, even before he went to dairy?

Kirk: No, before he went to dairy he raised cotton. I can remember just a little bitty child . . .

LH: Did you pick cotton?

Kirk: I picked it at about four or five.

LH: Do you know how he decided to go into dairy?

Kirk: I don't know. All the whole community went in the same year, at the same time.

LH: What year was that?

Kirk: I think it was 1922, .

LH: So that was before the Depression hit.

Kirk: Yeah.

LH: Do you know, were cotton prices low or . . . .

Kirk: Yeah, that's what he couldn't make a living. Five little .

LH: Do you know how the whole community came to go into dairy all at once?

Kirk: No, I don't.

LH: Was there like any extension agents, or something like that?

Kirk: I guess it was.

LH: Did it prove successful pretty fast?

Kirk: I guess they made a living at it. They had to make a living some way.

LH: Did most people, then, who went into dairy stay in it?

Kirk: Well, yeah for a while. A lot of them and they and a whole lot of them sold out. All the dairymen right around here.

LH: When you were a boy did you have names for your cows?

Kirk: Well, part of. Now they go by numbers.

LH: Do they paint the numbers on the side of the cows?

Kirk: No, they got nicknames.

LH: Do you miss that?

Kirk: Names?

LH: Well, yeah.

Kirk: No. [chuckle] There's too many of them, you couldn't remember. I guess I'd have 400 head it would be hard to. Of course, there's a lot of dairymen that they have got stalls for all their cows and got 200 cows 300 head of cows. come down the line stall, like 20 cows out of the herd. Every time he cracked that whip called a name it'd come out stall, and it had the name over the stall. Then every of the stalls come out.

LH: Do you think your cows are that smart?

Kirk: No. A cow is smart enough that they can open the gate and things like that, you know, . Our cows are not that smart. I won't a lot of them . I guess they were .

LH: Well, you were a pretty small boy when they started to get cows. Were you scared of them or were you used to being around stock?

Kirk: just three or four cows . We lived off the farm.

LH: Did your mother keep a garden?

Kirk: Oh, yeah, a nice one.

Martha Kirk:

Kirk: The pens .

# BEGIN TAPE I SIDE II

LH: How are you going to make the decision about when to retire and how . . . .

Kirk: I haven't got that far along. I don't know.

LH: What kind of breed of cattle do you have?

Kirk: Holstien.

LH: Is that what you've always had?

Kirk: Yes, ever since my daddy first got started. We had and remain the dairy business

LH: Why is that?

Kirk: To get more milk. .

LH: Is the heat here a question for cows?

Kirk: Well, really, in real hot weather when it gets up hot and humid like it does in the summertime, it's hard on cows. But it's normally cows do all right.

LH: Does it cut the production?

Kirk: Yes, hot weather. They don't eat, they lay in the shade they don't get up to come and eat, drink water.

LH: Have you changed the way you, like how long you might keep a cow around?

Kirk: We keep records of that. The records.

LH: Now with all the milk going into a single tank, is there a way to measure the production?

Kirk: Oh, yes. We have about once a month, you see them drop.

LH: What's the average?

Kirk: We track.

LH:

Kirk: They get about 4 to 5 days rest between and we.

LH: How does that compare with when you were a boy, the production end?

Kirk: Well, it's up.

LH: Why is it up?

Kirk: It's. Our production has dropped some in the last year and a half. Only one reason, we

decreased the cattle much, I guess, quite as much as we did before.

LH: Do you think the breed has improved at all?

Kirk: Oh, yes, the breed has improved. The breed, the production .

LH: Did you keep records of cows when you first started out?

Kirk: Well, we've been keeping records for the last 20 years, I guess, right after we took over the dairy farm. A lot of dairymen I have met .

LH: What's that mean?

Kirk: So I was not ready .

LH: Is there any advantage to that?

Kirk: Not in production. The only thing that's

LH: When do you breed your cows?

Kirk: We breed them year round. We used to breed them for fall production

LH: When did you start to use artificial insemination?

Kirk: Oh,

LH: So you had to keep a bull around before that?

Kirk: Yeah, we kept a bull

LH: Why is that?

Kirk: breeding cows

LH: Why is that?

Kirk:

LH: Have you ever worked off the farm yourself?

Kirk: Never worked  
in public life. My son never has either. Have more to do  
here

LH: Have you incorporated with your brother?

Kirk: No.

LH: It's a partnership?

Kirk: It's still a partnership.

LH: Has anybody from his family worked off the farm?

Kirk: Well, he's got one son that works off it. he

LH: What are your children's names and when were they  
born?

Kirk: Bobby, Junior. His name's Robert M. born  
December 17, '52. Vicky Dale Kirk McKee.

LH: What's her last name?

Kirk: McKee.

LH: M-c-K-e-y?

Kirk: Yeah.

Martha Kirk: No, no. M-c-K-e-e.

LH: And when was she born?

Martha Kirk: August the 12th, '57.

LH: And the other . . .

Kirk: That's all of them.

LH: So you were married a while before you had your  
children.

Martha Kirk:

LH: Did the children work on the farm?

Kirk: Our children? . She helped her mother in the garden and in the house.

LH: Did she ever work in the barns?

Kirk: Oh, no. She

LH: I didn't come here to talk to you about the reservoir. Can I ask you if you think the community's going to change ?

Kirk: Well, we've already got the . I imagine it'll change

Martha Kirk: It won't be the same.

Kirk: It will be the same

LH: What was the community like ? How

Kirk: Well, we had a church

LH: What church was that?

Kirk: Cane Creek Baptist Church.

LH: What do the do?

Kirk: Well, they . It was statewide. In fact

LH: Do they have social activities?

Kirk: Church every Sunday. [long inaudible speech here] When we first moved here when we were first married, you couldn't see a house and now

LH: Do they get involved in the community?

Kirk: Part of them do. A lot of them don't.

Martha Kirk: We have a lot of

LH: And that's the kind of thing that's likely to continue.

Martha Kirk: Absolutely. Also

LH: Your son Bobby talked to the other interviewer about how much he enjoyed going over to the dairy co-op when he was a boy and they had big socials. The places you've marketed your milk, how has that changed over the years?

Kirk: Well, when we first started out and a few years after that

LH: What did you do with the skim if you

Kirk: Feed it to the pigs.

LH: How many hogs did you keep?

Kirk: Oh, about seven or eight

LH:

Kirk:

You asked about how we market our milk. There were 15 dairymen putting together their milk in Chapel Hill right across from . go around and carry Chapel Hill

Martha Kirk: Franklin Street.

Kirk: On Franklin Street. It was right on the corner there across from the furniture company. Do you know where that is?

LH: Yes.

Kirk: That's where it was. So we there for years.

LH: When was that?

Kirk:

LH: Were you one of those dairymen?

Kirk: Yeah, we were out there

LH: What was the name of that company?

Kirk: Long Meadow. And then we went to Durham

Flav-O-Rich, sold out to Flav-O-Rich.

LH: How come you sold out?

Kirk: I guess the plant . I figured it would sell and I don't know why.

LH: Now, co-op, did all the members have to go to ?

Kirk: No, the board of directors and they turned it over to somebody else. I think

LH: Why is that?

Kirk: sold all their milk for

LH: Now did you say better off or bad off?

Kirk: Better.

LH: Better off.

Kirk: I think so. I think a lot different from theirs.

LH: Are they not willing to buy as much milk as you can produce now?

Kirk: Well they take it all. The price

LH: You get what?

Kirk: You get a price

LH: I'm sorry, what kind of price?

Kirk: They have a price that's been set on . You  
over your production, you got a base, for anything  
over your base you price

LH: Now, milk prices have't changed the way used  
to.

Kirk: No, milk prices have held pretty good in the  
last few years. We have a set milk price three

LH: There is the Milk Commission just

Kirk: I don't know but I think they're trying to do  
the Milk Commission out

LH: How do you think that's going to help?

Kirk:

LH: Well, I've been asking you a lot of questions.  
Are there any things about dairy farming that you think I  
might need to know about that I haven't thought to ask you  
about?

Kirk:

LH: Are you going to stay here if you do decide to  
retire?

Kirk: I ain't going to leave.

LH: Then

Kirk: over the hill over there We  
came here in 1945

LH: That's a lot of work to do between

Kirk:

LH: Do you like your work? Do you like farming?

Kirk: Oh, yes.

LH: Why?

Kirk: It's all I've ever done. I just like the outdoors. We [long speech inaudible] 24 acres

LH: So you wouldn't have any

Kirk: Well, it's not that

LH: And

Kirk:

LH: Well, Mr. Kirk, I appreciate the time you've given to this in answering my questions.

Kirk: Well, I hope I've been helpful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]