

Speaker 1:

All righty, Robert. Thank you for coming in today to be interviewed for our Iowa Oral History Project. So for the recording, could you please tell me your first and last name?

Robert Coulter:

Robert Coulter.

Speaker 1:

All right, Robert. And where do you currently live?

Robert Coulter:

Here in Conrad.

Speaker 1:

Conrad, Iowa. And, if you're willing to share, would you please let us know what year you were born?

Robert Coulter:

1935.

Speaker 1:

'35. And when you grew up on your farm in Iowa, was it here also in the Conrad area or where exactly did you grow up?

Robert Coulter:

Well, I was born in Burlington, Iowa, but my folks moved to Conrad, Iowa when I was one year old so I figured I'd better come along. And I lived in town for four years and then they moved out onto the farm where my dad and my grandpa were farming. They built another little house out there for us to move out of town, so we were out on the farm. So from four years old, I lived on the farm a mile and a half west of Conrad.

Speaker 1:

And you guys moved from Burlington to be closer to that family farm? Your extended family was already there? And had they purchased the farm or had they...?

Robert Coulter:

My grandpa had, yeah.

Speaker 1:

It was your grandpa's and then you all three moved to work on it in the same area.

Robert Coulter:

Yep.

Speaker 1:

How did your grandpa end up here? I don't want to put you on the spot there.

Robert Coulter:

He was living further south of town, closer to Marshalltown, but this land became available right out here west of town. And he bought it and everybody thought he was crazy because it was mostly a swamp. And he got that tilled out and it become one of the best farms in Grundy County in my opinion. It's got good black soil called Muscatine, Muscatine Tama soil, and you can't beat that for growing corn.

Speaker 1:

And that was the attraction. He wanted to come here for the soil once he got it drained. And then do you have a favorite story you could share with us about growing up on the farm?

Robert Coulter:

Well, we lived just less than a quarter of a mile from where we lived, our house to where grandpa and grandma lived. So there was a lot of traveling back and forth. And it was a busy road. It was a blacktop even then, but it was pretty busy. So they didn't allow me to be in the street, out on the road part, but I could go back and forth in the ditch. And we had a little garden tractor that I could drive by the time I was about eight years old. So I spent a lot of trips going back and forth between grandpa and grandma's on a garden tractor in the ditch.

Speaker 1:

Did you mow the ditch as you went and have a little path or were you just breaking trail on the lawn tractor?

Robert Coulter:

I think we had a little path there where we mowed, but it was also a lawnmower, so they mowed the lawns with it in both places. But I rode it for entertainment. It had a little cart you could pull behind it, and I sat on the little two-wheel cart behind the tractor that had the mower on it.

Speaker 1:

So what kind of crops did your family grow with that beautiful soil they purchased?

Robert Coulter:

Well, at that time, my grandpa didn't allow soybeans because he thought it caused too much wash. Well, it couldn't have washed much. The farm was about as flat as this table right here, but he wouldn't allowed soybeans. So it was all corn, oats and hay.

Speaker 1:

Corn, oats, hay. So you guys did a three-crop rotation?

Robert Coulter:

And they milked 40 cows, so it took a lot of hay.

Speaker 1:

It took a lot of hay.

Robert Coulter:

Yep. It was a dairy farm, and that was extent of our crops.

Speaker 1:

So the crops were mainly to support the dairy cattle rather than for sale as commodity crops.

Robert Coulter:

Mostly. We grew a little more corn than what the cows needed, but the hay and oats all went to the cows or the chickens or the pigs.

Speaker 1:

You had dairy cows, chickens, pigs. What other kind of animals did your family have on the farm?

Robert Coulter:

Well, that was about it, except there was one old horse that grandpa didn't have the heart to get rid of when they went to tractors. And so that horse stayed around the farm until he got too old and died.

Speaker 1:

And I'm guessing on a farm with a dairy barn, you would've had cats.

Robert Coulter:

Oh yeah, yeah.

Speaker 1:

And dogs? Did you get to have a pet dog or working dog?

Robert Coulter:

Oh, yeah. We had a dog. Grandpa didn't, but we had a dog at our place and cats. They come and go. We didn't raise them, they just took care of themselves.

Speaker 1:

They were nobody's animals to raise.

Robert Coulter:

Once in a while you'd have a cat behind the cow in the cow barns when you was milking. And if you was real accurate and the cat was quick enough, you could squirt a little milk across the aisle. The cat would catch it and drink it right out of the air.

Speaker 1:

They weren't much of a cash crop though, those cats. And then you were raising food for your livestock. Did you also raise food for your own family? Did you go grocery shopping or was it all there on the farm?

Robert Coulter:

Mother and grandma both had gardens, but my mother was not very good at some vegetables. Her most successful thing was green beans and we had green beans just about every day of the year, year round, because she canned a lot of beans and put them in the basement.

Speaker 1:

So the soybeans weren't allowed, but the green beans, those were the ones. So lots of green beans, probably your own milk. Anything else that you raised and ate on the farm? No cats, hopefully.

Robert Coulter:

No. I was raised on like a dairy farm, so I drank a lot of milk. And when you talk about milk, it was whole milk and Guernsey milk. And the whole milk today I think is about 4%. And Guernsey milk was 5% butter fat. So I didn't have any trouble maintaining my weight, drinking all that milk. And when I was real young, I'd go into the dairy barn and grandpa had another hired man besides my dad. And I'd take a cup out of the milk room or the washroom and take it out there and then milk that into the cup out of the cow and I'd stand there behind the cow and drink that. It had a lot of foam on it and I ended up with a foam mustache. And so that was one of my memories of doing that.

Speaker 1:

No, sneaking around. They'd know if you were into the bucket.

Robert Coulter:

And the milk wasn't pasteurized or homogenized like it is nowadays.

Speaker 1:

So you said you were having to milk by hand into a cup. Did you have any machinery or technology to help you out with that farm work?

Robert Coulter:

Yeah, they milked all the cows with machines, but they usually had to strip them a little bit to make sure that there was no dirt or anything on it before they started putting the cups on. So they always had a little milk that they just wasted. And that's when you gave some to the cats. But we had a few hogs, not like they raise now like I ended up farming before I got done, when I grew up and started farming. But that main focus was the cows and grandpa was insistent on if you milk them at five o'clock in the morning, you milk them at five o'clock at night and you couldn't be five minutes off.

Speaker 1:

Did you have to have a clock for that or did the cows just let you know?

Robert Coulter:

Well, cows pretty much let you know, but if they didn't, grandpa did it because he kept track pretty close.

Speaker 1:

So it was you, your dad, your grandpa. You said you had a hired man. What kind of farm work did everybody in your family do and did you have any other outside help?

Robert Coulter:

Well, dad wasn't as enthused about the cows as grandpa was so he was pretty much in charge of the field work. Did all of it and he loved the machinery and tinker the machinery and keep it going, and he could weld. He was a welder besides. And so he was pretty much in charge of all that. And grandpa took care of the cows. The hired man just worked where he was needed at the time.

Speaker 1:

And then did your mother do any farm work at all or was she just busy with the beans all the time?

Robert Coulter:

She helped out some. I had a big sister four years older than me, so she had two kids. But my sister was old enough she could look after me for a little while while Mother went and helped a little bit, but she didn't do a lot of farm work, but she was capable of doing it.

Speaker 1:

She probably had enough to do. And so you said you were doing the tractors and the lawnmower. What kind of machinery and technology did you have out on the farm?

Robert Coulter:

Like I said earlier, they originally were with horses, but I think about the time dad came home, they didn't use horses anymore. He had a F-20 tractor, which is an old tractor in '37 I think, or something like that. No. I don't know. It was back there in the early thirties somewhere. And eventually dad got an M and that was one step up. That was a nice looking tractor.

Speaker 1:

Did you get to drive that one?

Robert Coulter:

Not until I was about 10 years old and we had a little B Farmall also later, and that's when I was 10 years old. And that's what I learned to cultivate corn on when I was 10. And it was just a little two-row cultivator and the seat offset on it. So you sit over one row and the other row was on the other side of the tractor and you hoped it done its job because all you had charge of is that one right down in front of me where I was driving.

Speaker 1:

Now that's something I don't think people even know what cultivating corn is anymore. That was a big chunk of your spring and summer wouldn't it have been?

Robert Coulter:

Yeah. You've cultivated till the corn finally got too tall to drive through. After it got about four feet tall, you couldn't get through it with a big tractor. And there was another thing that they did in those days that dad was pretty good at. Because they didn't have chemicals, they wanted to get all the weeds and grass out. So he planted that corn with a four-row planter, but it was a wire planter and there was a heavy wire that went from one end of the field to the other, which was about a half a mile. And you got at the end, you had to get off and move the stake over and flip that wire over a little bit, put it back in the slot on the planter, and then you drove back across the field and there's notches on that wire every so often, 36 or 40 inches I believe it was then.

And so it dropped another hill of corn every 40 inches. So when you got all done planting, if you did it right, you could plow it north and south and you could cultivate it east and west because the rows run both ways. And that was pretty hard for a lot of people to do because you had to get that wire just right.

Speaker 1:

No GPS and set it on the control panel and let it go.

Robert Coulter:

Nope, none of that.

Speaker 1:

It sounds like an art form. It's just amazing how much you were able to do with a wire.

Robert Coulter:

You couldn't cultivate that way but when the corn got up about a foot tall, you could actually row it at a diagonal also. I mean, you can see there's a perfect row of corn ways. If they were perfect, north and south and east and west, you could also diagonal.

Speaker 1:

There's a lot of perfects involved in there, Robert, at that point. So are any of the members of your family still farming?

Robert Coulter:

No, none of them. My son came home after... Well, when I got a little older, I started helping my dad and grandpa had retired and moved to town. And so my dad and I farmed together for a couple years and then he decided to get into the electrical business. He was quite involved with electricity all his life too.

Speaker 1:

And he was the handyman, fix-it guy on the farm.

Robert Coulter:

On the farm. When him and I were together, he was the head of everything and I just did what he told me, which I'd done most of my life. But anyway, he moved to town to become an electrician and wired people's houses and buildings and everything all over the county. And I became the farmer and I'd only

farmed the place two years and my grandpa come in one day and said he'd sold the farm. Kind of a shock to me, but I had to find something else to do and I couldn't find any farm around here. So I farmed for two years up by Hampton, 50 miles from here. And then I found the farm south of town, two and a half miles. I moved back to Conrad, and that's where I was for 39 years till I retired. So I haven't moved around much, but most of the time I was pretty close to Conrad.

Speaker 1:

And you said your son farmed with you for a while there?

Robert Coulter:

He came back after college. He worked for a fertilizer company for a while and he finally said, "Dad," he said, "I don't like having 50 bosses." 50 people he was selling to, telling him what to do. He wondered if we could expand. So he came home and started farming with me and we bought an 80 that had a house on it for him to live on. And then we eventually rented a couple other farms. And then after about, I don't know, seven or eight years, he decided he didn't like the field work. He'd rather just raise hogs. So I sold him the acreage off that 80 that we'd bought. And he built some more hog houses and he went into just producing hogs on his own. And I had a hired man after that. Before I quit farming, I was raising a thousand head of hogs farrow-to-finish every year and farming a thousand acres. So we were pretty busy. Long ways from the 160 acres where I started.

Speaker 1:

160 acres. And then your son's still running that big thousand-acre farm?

Robert Coulter:

No, no. No, he quit the farming part. He never helped me at all. He just stayed on his acreage and raised hogs on his own. And now he's went out of the hog business and he works in the bank. And I was glad that I was quitting farming because I didn't think he'd loan me any money at the bank. You can't farm nowadays without a good banker.

Speaker 1:

He knew too much about the farming business to want to invest in it. I've heard that story before I think. So now get to live in town and have the easy life.

Robert Coulter:

Yep.

Speaker 1:

Well, thank you so much for sharing with us today, Robert. Do you have any other good stories we should record while we have this going? Anything we missed?

Robert Coulter:

Can't think of anything. We pretty much covered everything that we had. I don't know too much else of anything. Can't think of anything. Nope.

Speaker 1:

All right. Well, thank you so much for sharing with us and we hope we'll have lots of people appreciate listening to your interview.

Robert Coulter:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Thank you, Robert.

Robert Coulter:

Thank you.