

WAYNE ENSZ TALKS ABOUT CUSTOM CUTTING

Wayne Ens, of McPherson, grew up near Inman and worked as a custom wheat harvester as a youth. He was interviewed by Heather Holcomb on June 23, 2011.

HH: You mentioned ... that you were on a custom harvesting crew when you were in high school. ... How old were you when you did that?

WE: Fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen.

HH: And who did you work for?

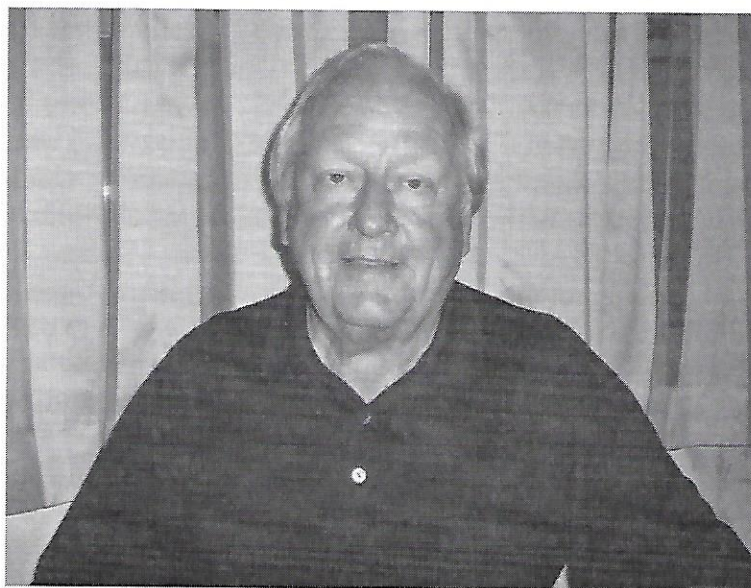
WE: I worked for Floyd Klaassen, spelled with a "K" — Klaassen.

HH: And where was he out of?

WE: Inman, Kansas, just across the section from us.

HH: How did you get started on doing that? Why did you do that?

WE: Well, when you grow up on a farm you drive a tractor right away and you drive a pickup almost right away. ... My cousin Roy, his dad has a pasture out in the Sandhills — the Sandhills are west of here, west of Plum Street, and he had a pasture out there and he had an old Chevy coupe. He came by one day and he said, "Come on Wayne, let's go check the calves." So we got some salt blocks in the back of this Chevy and you drive down a gravel road and then a dirt road and then you get to the pasture and open it up and you're just in a Sandhills pasture and there is no road. So he stopped and got out and opened the gate and he told me, "Drive the car through." Well, I'm fourth grade, fifth grade, whatever, and I said, "I can't," and he said, "Sure you can." So I got behind the wheel and put in the gear and gave it the gas and shot through the gate opening. He closed the gate — he was laughing — and he went around to the passenger side and he said "Let's go." I said, "What?" And he said, "Yeah, you can drive out here." I said, "When I touch the foot- feet I can't see the windshield." Well, he said, "Give it the gas and then sit up and see where you're going and then slide down and give it the gas and then sit up to see where you're going. Let's kind of go this way." So that was my first experience of driving a car.



HH: Were you driving a truck at 15? ...

WE: Yeah ... this neighbor of mine, Floyd Klaassen, was not 30 years old, he had a wife and three kids, and that's in the late- to mid-fifties — '57, '58, '59 — and he wanted to start in on custom cutting so he got two old model trucks and he got two combines and he got a long trailer house and a little short truck to pull the trailer house with. He came over and said, "Do you want to go along wheat cutting?" You know, I was 15 years old ... He said, "What do you want to do? Do you want to drive the truck or the combine?" I said I'd just as soon drive the truck. He got another neighbor of mine and another neighbor of mine, so three neighbor boys went with Floyd Klaassen and we left Kansas ... Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Dakotas, and up in Montana. I figured out one time that by the time I got my driver's license I'd gotten tens of thousands of miles of driving. But that's what we did, it was work, it wasn't easy work, it was hard work. The employer treated us well, we cut a lot of wheat, but I'd always drive the trucks and ... Floyd would go around and get the work and get the things lined up and so forth.

HH: Were the other two crew members about your age?

WE: Exactly the same age. We went through high school together and so forth.

HH: So you went with him his first year?

WE: His first three years of cutting.

HH: Did he have an easy time finding jobs? ...

WE: No, [but] we always had work. He was friends with other people that were cutting wheat and in those days, with the smaller combines, self-propelled but smaller, they needed a lot of custom harvesters to come in and cut the wheat. He had a 30-foot trailer, eight-by-thirty foot trailer house and he and his wife and three kids and the three of us ate and slept and showered and And his wife would do the laundry, she would do the cooking. The kids would ride along in the truck and it just became family. ...

HH: So was it a big adventure for you, or you had already been some places?

WE: Well, it's an opportunity to earn some money. At that time, you know, 15 years old and I was making a summer's worth of wages, it was good. One thing my dad did do, I'll just touch back on that, I can remember at a young age we would get in the car and we would drive, we would go places. Old Mexico, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, Missouri, Arkansas ... we would travel ... a person's education level is in a great sense determined by the travels they have taken.

[Years later, there was an] Enszt family Christmas gathering at Inman, my grandmother had passed away, Grandpa was still alive. The typical family was all there and the food was there and everybody was having a good time. The meal was over with and things were being cleaned up, the kids were running around everywhere, I was probably no more than 30. Grandpa was sitting off by himself, so I went over and asked him, in German, if he wanted a piece of cherry pie. "Yeah, just a small piece, just a sliver." And I asked him ... "Do you also want a small cup of coffee?" "Yeah." And then, "Bring yourself something." So I brought them and sat down and we started talking. ... He said, "You know, when [your grandmother] and I were younger and we lived on the farm place two miles north of Inman we would go in a wagon with wheat or oats, hitch a team and we would leave in the morning early and we would follow the railroad tracks past Inman and Medora and go to Hutchinson. At Medora would be the lower Arkansas River. If the river was up, there was a man there that lived in a dugout that had a barge and we could drive the team and the wagon on the barge and then he would pull us across for whatever charge. Then we would go on into Hutch. It would take all day to get to Hutch. We would sell the grains and then if we had time we would go to town and buy our staples and basics and so forth. Stay the night with friends or family, load up the next day and come home. It took us all day to come home, a two-day trip to go to Hutch and back." He said, "Then as I got older, it hasn't been that many years ago the kids bought me an airplane ticket so I could fly to California to see [them]." And he said, "You know, I went from two days to go to Hutch and back to two hours to go to California." ... He stopped and looked at me and said, "What are you going to do?" I can vividly see that. He set into my mind, what all did he go through in his lifetime and then what did I go through, what changes. Cars were here, radios were here, TVs were here, airplanes were here ... everything was already here when I came along, and he saw all those changes. ...

HH: When you were custom cutting, did the combines have cabs?

WE: Oh, no.

HH: What kind of combines?

WE: Massey 92s.

HH: And what did you think ... I mean what was it like combining without a cab?

WE: Didn't give it any thought, didn't give it any thought. When you grew up on a farm, by the time you were halfway through summer time your bare feet were so tough you could walk on cockleburs and sandburs and everything else and it didn't bother you. Growing up, you were used to being out in the weather and just wore jeans. You didn't have a shirt on, you didn't have shoes on, you didn't have a hat on, you just went outside, you always just went outside. And to go into wheat harvest, you just went into wheat harvest. You just took off. You went down south and you started being in the sun and you just worked in the sun all day every day. I would drive the combine. We'd get to where we'd unload the combines on the run, I'd drive up to the truck while we were cutting wheat and never have to stop. At lunch time, we'd pull up and stop and the guy driving the combine would stop and get off and I'd get on the combine and I'd keep the combine going for another round or two, whatever it took him to eat, and then the other combine would come and I'd get on it and then that person could go and sit in the shade and have lunch and stuff while I drove that combine around.

HH: Did the combines have lights?

WE: For night cutting? Oh, yes.

HH: How late into the night did you cut?

WE: Until the wheat got tough, and that would be dependent on the wind, the humidity levels, how soon the damp would set in. And the damp could set in quick. Typically not that late, an hour after sundown would be about the limit.

HH: And what kind of a truck were you driving?

WE: Well, let's see, the first truck was a GMC '54 model, the other truck was a Chevy ... it was about that same year, but the Chevy truck had a longer bed on it ... it had a 15-foot bed, and the GMC had a 13-and-a-half-foot bed on it. You could get about 300 bushels on the long one or about 250 bushels on the short one, which is about what they put into one combine bin today *[laughter]*. ...

HH: Did you have a favorite place to cut?

WE: Montana.

HH: Why was that?

WE: We cut for a Clinton Bradbury, a bachelor. He had homesteaded the place, and we would typically get up to Willard, Montana, and get up to his farm area, and the wheat wouldn't be ripe. It was kind of the last of the cutting, you know there wasn't that much cutting to do, but there were still acres to be cut and we'd go out there to the farm. ...

HH: What part of Montana was this?

WE: Central north, in fact, I often told Clinton, I said, "Clinton, do I need a U.S. citizenship paper to get back? 'cause half these fields are in Canada" *[laughter]*. He said, "No, they are not." ... We were going out one morning and I was riding with Clinton and he pulled over and stopped and pointed the pickup to the east, we were on a pretty good rise. He said, "Look over there, what do you see?" Well there was this town. He said, "How far away do you think that is?" I said, "Well, with the curve of the earth and so forth, ten, twelve miles." He said, "Nope, that ... town is 60 miles and that's a morning mirage of that town into the clouds, you're seeing that town in the clouds." A morning sunrise mirage. ...

I had another story I was going to tell you. Oh, cutting wheat in Montana. I don't remember the name of the fellow we were cutting for, it wasn't Clinton Bradbury, it was another person. We were finishing up cutting this one field and ... the farmer was next to the wheat header and at the edge of the wheat header was an accumulation of wheat straw. He reached down to grab the wheat straw out of the edge of that header and the cycle bar made one more slice and it cut his thumb off. Just thunk, right through the first and second joint and he just grabbed the hanky and jammed it on his thumb and my boss Floyd said, "Let's go." So he jumped in the pickup and he took off. So we are sitting there and I get up on the truck, on the box area, and I sit and I hooked my thumb right on the edge of the side bin and I cut my thumb, and I thought, oh man ... it was just bleeding like crazy. In the meantime, Gene had gone over to the combine, and he said, "Here's his thumb!" I said, "Well, give me his thumb, I got to go to the doctor, I got to sew this together." So I took his thumb and stuck it in my shirt pocket and I jump in my truck and I'm driving myself to the hospital, probably 20 miles from there, and I pulled up in the hospital and asked if there had been someone come in with his thumb just cut off, and they said, "Yeah." And I said, "I've got his thumb." "You do!" So here ... they took his thumb, cleaned it up and sewed it back together. The next year we were out there in the field, and he said, "I've got my thumb! It doesn't flex as good as the other, but I've got my thumb."

But the rest of that story is that I'd cut my thumb, so I needed to have a nurse or somebody sew this together for me and every time I'd lay it open like this the blood would come squirting out. So the gal said, "Just hold it together and we'll get our stuff together." They were gathering all the stuff, and this young doctor came in and [the nurse] said, using technical terms, what I'd done and what she got prepared and so forth. So he said, "OK, lay it open." So I laid my thumb back like this and the blood just started coming out again and he took one look at it, and he just goes, "Ohhhhhh." Kerplunk! *[indicates fainting]* And passed out right there. So the nurse said, "Well, if you don't mind, I'll sew it up for you." And I said, "Sew it up." So she got the stitches and sewed it up and she was pretty well done when the doctor starts rolling over. "What happened?" "Well, you passed out" *[laughter]*. Well, anyhow, just interesting stories, just stuff that happens.