Interview with Orion Samuelson

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, February 2, 2009. My name is Mark DePue; I'm a volunteer with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and we're here today with Orion Samuelson. Good morning, Orion.

Samuelson: Good morning.

DePue: This is quite an honor for me. This is part of our Oral History of Illinois Agriculture Project that we are partnering with the Illinois State Museum, and from the beginning, from the inception of our plan, we've been looking forward to talk to the voice of agriculture in the Midwest, and probably—I would venture to say, Orion, that you're the most recognizable voice of agriculture in the United States.

Samuelson: Well, I've been doing it so long. You know, I've been at this business for fifty-six years, so I guess over that time period, a lot of people dialing the dial come across me.

DePue: And we are coming up to your fiftieth anniversary with WGN radio here in Chicago.

Samuelson: Well, God willing and the boss willing, I will make fifty years in September of 2010. My wife has given me permission to shoot for that half-century mark, because there has never been anyone else on this station that's been on the air for fifty years.

DePue: Well, and that's some good company to be keeping—the names that have been on this station over the many years.

Samuelson: Oh, the people that I've had the pleasure of working with, from Wally Phillips to Franklin McCormick to Harry Carey and Jack Brickhouse and to Uncle Bobby and Spike O'Dell, and just—it's a history library of broadcasters, as far as I'm concerned. And when I write the book—which I'm going to do—I have told all of my friends that in all of my years of working here, there are just two people I did not enjoy working with, but you'll have to read the book to find out who they are. (laughter)

DePue: Well, maybe these interviews will help you write that book, to a certain extent.

Samuelson: I'm hoping so, because I have been talking about doing it for the last ten years, if nothing else, just for my two grandchildren, so they'll have some sense of what their grandfather did. But because of what I've witnessed, I think I could probably share some highlights and some lowlights that our farmers and ranchers and ranchers have faced over the years and so—I have the title. I'm going to call it *The Manure Tour: Life with an Agricultural Broadcaster*. But sitting down to do it—because I'm not a writer; I do all my writing with my mouth. So that's what you're doing here; you're letting me use my mouth, and maybe the audio can be used by a writer to put it together.

DePue: Well, you'll have the added benefit of actually having transcripts of what we've talked about here, as well.

Samuelson: I appreciate that. It's an honor for me, incidentally, to do this. Thank you.

DePue: Well, thank you very much. I think I also should mention where we're at, because we're obviously in the WGN studios. This is in your office in those studios, but we're in the Tribune Tower, which brings a lot of history just in itself, does it not?

Samuelson: A tremendous amount of history. Landmark—historical landmark—history, the lobby of this Tribune Tower—and I think the cornerstone was laid in 1925—and the lobby is one of those National Historic Landmarks that cannot be altered; regardless of what we do to the rest of the building, it must remain the same. And Colonel McCormick, who was the ultra-conservative publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* has had carved into the walls the various press sayings that go back to Voltaire (laughs) and to deep history. Plus the fact, it's fun to watch tourists who come to Chicago, because they stand outside the tower, and they look at the rocks or the stones that have come from the White House and from Buckingham Palace and from the pyramids, that the Colonel said, "We ought to have those here in the walls of the building," and they are here.

DePue: Well, he was quite a character himself.

Samuelson: I had the opportunity not of meeting him, but when I was working at a radio station in Appleton, Wisconsin, back in 1954, we were a Mutual station. And WGN at that time was part of the Mutual radio network and originated programs like *Tom Mix*, the Monday through Friday Western serial, and Saturday night did the *Saturday Night Theater of the Air*, which was performed in the building adjacent to the tower with a live audience, a live orchestra, and they would do operettas on Saturday night. And working at the station in Appleton, Wisconsin, I would hear this because I was on duty on Saturday nights. And then at the end of the program, at about 9:55, the Colonel would come on and deliver his weekly sermon (laughter) according to Colonel McCormick. And so I sat listening to

those sermons, never thinking that I'd someday be working (laughs) in the same studios that the Colonel was in.

DePue: I must tell you that I've got a military background. My buddies in the military can never understand why in the world the First Infantry Division Museum is in Chicago—actually, west, in the suburbs of Chicago—and it's because McCormick, Colonel McCormick, was in the First Division—was in the Big Red One—during the First World War, and by God, he had a love for that as well, didn't he?

Samuelson: He really did, and the museum is—again, I love history, and it is extremely well done, at Cantigny [Can-TEE-nee]—if you want to call it Can-TIG-nee or Can-TEE-nee—but it is worth a visit. It's open to the public. And people who work very hard to preserve the memory of the military people in World War I, I just have a high admiration for, and he certainly did his part to do that.

DePue: Well, enough of Robert McCormick; let's move on to Orion Samuelson. Tell us when and where you were born, Orion.

Samuelson: Born March thirty-first on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, near La Crosse.

DePue: What year?

Samuelson: Nineteen thirty-four. Raging blizzard March thirty-first, so much so that the doctor could not get out to the farm to deliver me, and so a great-aunt was there, and she was sort of a midwife, and so she did the delivery and did it well, because I survived, and here I am. But I was born in the bedroom of the farm home where I ultimately grew up.

DePue: Orion—that's an unusual name, at least it is for me.

Samuelson: Well, it is. I think I've met maybe three other Orions. There are a lot of Orrins, and I get called Orrin probably 70 percent of the time by people who address me. My parents wanted a name that started with O and a name that started with C for my two grandfathers, Olie and Carl. They were Norwegians who came to this country from Norway and settled in the hills of Western Wisconsin, and so when they decided to name me after Olie, they thought, Orrin is too common, so we'll call him Orion. Subsequently, of course, people say, "Well, they knew you were going to be a star, so that's the constellation." (laughter) I don't think they had any idea that was going to happen. (laughs)

DePue: Now you mention your two grandfathers. Both immigrated to the United States?

Samuelson: Both into this country back in the 1860s and 1880s. As a matter of fact, I take a group of people who sign up for the tour back to Norway every other year. In 2009, we'll do our fifth tour to Norway. And so I have stood in what is left of the foundation of the home where my grandmother Jenny was born in 1864. That was far more emotional than I thought it would be. And in 1872, when she was eight years old, she and an older brother and

an adult uncle were sent to America because times were so tough, not only in Norway, but all of Northern Europe at that time, and America was the land of opportunity, and so the parents sent their children away, knowing they would never see them again, and sent them off to give them a better life. And talking to a genealogist from Norway who I've come to know during our trips, with tears in his eyes, he tells me he has read the letters from the homesick children in America to their parents, and he has read the letters that parents wrote to their children, and he always concludes those stories by saying, "I hope all of you in America appreciate what your forefathers did to give you the opportunity to grow up where you've grown up."

DePue: Why Wisconsin?

Samuelson: As I visited Norway the first time, I saw that the hills were quite similar—not quite as high as in Norway—but hills and the streams and—as I say in Norway, the hills are steep to the point where they carve out a shelf and put up the barn and the house and then farm down the hill. And that was much of what we had our farm. We had 200 acres, and ninety of it tillable; the rest of it was up and down hills and trees and rocks and everything else.

DePue: Were they breaking virgin ground when they came here, or...? Because I know that Wisconsin, by the 1870s and later, was already well-populated.

Samuelson: Yeah, it was populated, and I don't think they were breaking virgin ground. But I have not been able to fully research how they acquired the land. I've seen the deed where my father was deeded the land by his father, who came from Norway, but how Granddad got the land, I've not really been able to research.

DePue: Okay. Tell us a little bit more about growing up on this farm. What kind of farm was it, first of all?

Samuelson: Okay. It was a dairy farm. We had thirty milk cows, we had six sows, and we had 200 chickens, and we had a dog and thirteen cats. And it was my dad and mother and my sister and me. We certainly weren't wealthy, but we had food on the table and clothes on our back. And I distinctly remember, after moving into the life that I'm in now—because there's no way I could have ever imagined what was in my future when I'm sitting on a three-legged milking stool at 5:00 in the morning, milking cows. And one of the things I'll never forget, we would take two long trips a year to La Crosse, thirty-two miles away, and we would go in December to do some Christmas shopping, and then we would go in the spring to buy some clothes for the summer season. And we'd get up extra-early, we'd milk the cows early, and then we'd drive to La Crosse in this old '37 Ford, and then we'd get back in time to milk cows. And I think of that often as I sit in an airplane flying to Washington, spending the day interviewing secretary of agriculture, senators, and congressmen, and then flying home to have dinner at home that night. And I will always be a nose-to-the-

window flyer, because I'm just fascinated that I can do that in light of that twice-a-year thirty-two-mile trip.

DePue: Born in 1934, you were very young at the tail end of the Depression. Do you remember the Depression at all?

Samuelson: I do not remember the Depression, but I remember the lesson that my father said over and over and over again as I was growing up—and it's too bad that we don't have some of the Depression-era people in today's economy—two things he always said: don't buy what you can't afford and don't borrow what you can't pay back. And he said that over and over and over again. And when we build a new barn in 1948, he didn't buy a piece of lumber until he had the cash.

DePue: Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Samuelson: I do. Yeah, I do remember it, because I was seven years old at the time. And I remember World War II very well, because we would listen to the radio, to Gabriel Heater, to H.V. Kaltenborn, to Fulton Lewis, Jr. And Gabriel Heater particularly would start his broadcast by saying, "Ah, there's good news tonight. The Allies have a victory." Or he would begin by saying, "Oh, there's bad news tonight," and he'd talk about a victory for the German army, and I'd go to bed thinking they were going to be coming over the hill the next day.

DePue: So very early in your life, these names just rolled right off your tongue. They'd been emblazoned in your memory. They had a larger-than-life feel for you when you were listening to them?

Samuelson: They did, (clears throat) and we—oh, give me a minute. (clears throat) We did not have electricity, and so that means that our radio was powered by B batteries. They were rationed during World War II, and so our only communication with the outside world was the radio. I would want to listen to *Captain Midnight*, *Tom Mix*, and *Superman*, and Dad would say, "No, we can't waste the batteries on that. We have to have the news." And of course, that news would come in in the evening. And the radio was our only connection. We did not have a newspaper, and we were a mile and a half away from the mailbox, so you couldn't deliver any timely news or information there. So it was basically word of mouth and the radio.

DePue: Recall any times that your folks would listen to Fireside Chats?

Samuelson: I do remember briefly the Fireside Chats, but for some reason—and again, part of it was we couldn't use those B batteries; we had to keep them for the daily news to know what was going on. And of course, a lot of people in our community were drafted and had gone off, including an uncle and two or three cousins, and so we wanted to know what was going on and have some sense, you know, of what they were doing. The closest movie house was about twenty-two miles away, and the only movies Dad wanted to see were Gene Autry and *Tarzan*, and those were the movies that we would go see, and that was a treat when we'd be able to do that.

DePue: You didn't get to see Betty Grable in her prime, then.

Samuelson: I did not. No, missed that.

DePue: How about school?

Samuelson: School—O'Connell Grade School. It was a one-room, eight-grade country school. It had about forty students. And you would sit in this one room, and as a first-grader, do your work, but you'd hear what second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders were learning, and so by the time I got to sixth grade, the teacher, Esther Garnett said, "Your test work and everything, no sense in you doing sixth grade, so we'll just promote you to seventh." So I graduated from that one-room, eight-grade country school when I was—let me see, it would have been—I would have been—1940s—I would have been thirteen, and I was out of the one-room, eight-grade country school, ready to go to Ontario High School in Ontario, Wisconsin. And there, they had an enrollment of about ninety-eight, and there were twenty-three in my graduating class, and because of that, I was salutatorian, because I didn't have that much competition. And as a...

DePue: You were making the commute every day to high school?

Samuelson: Yeah, school bus. School bus. Except for the first two years, when I couldn't walk and wasn't able to attend school. And then when I got on crutches, a neighbor boy would pick me up, and I'd ride with him.

DePue: Well, you've alluded to something we'll get to here pretty quick, but before that happened, tell me a little bit about the chores that you had to do. What was your daily routine, especially chore-wise.

Samuelson: Okay, daily routine: up in the morning at about five o'clock and out to the barn and milk cows and generally help Dad clean the barn, and then change clothes and go to school. When I got home from school, no question, I didn't have to look around for something to do because it was throw silage down from the silo and get water to the calves, the dairy calves, and clean the pens, and do the work, and then we would milk the cows and generally be in out of the barn at about eight o'clock at night. And then if there was homework, do the homework, and then off to bed. And before electricity came on the scene, we would do this by Aladdin lamp and kerosene lantern. Why we never burned the barn down, I'll never know—you know, carrying that open-flame kerosene lantern up into the hay mow—but we didn't. We had some lighting strikes on the barn, but it never burned, and so that was sort of a typical day. And then in the summertime, it was out in the field doing everything from oat harvest to hay harvest and all. We weren't baling hay; it was loose hay that would come up onto the wagon, and you'd take into the hay mow.

DePue: Wanted to ask you a couple more questions about going to school in a one-room schoolhouse, because kids today can't even begin to comprehend what that was like.

Samuelson: No.

DePue: You walked to school?

Samuelson: Walked to school, yeah.

DePue: How far was that?

Samuelson: It was a mile, and during World War II, when we had Daylight Saving Time the year 'round, I can remember walking to school almost in the dark because I'd leave for school at 8:00 and the sun wouldn't come up until after 8:00 because of Daylight Saving Time. And I can remember mornings when it was thirty-five below zero, and we'd still walk to school. If we'd had a snowstorm—and we would get them—we were a mile from a main road, and we had some winters where the snow would be so heavy, we'd be snowed in for three weeks before the plows could plow us out, so then we'd haul the cans of milk to the main road with the horses and the sleigh. And some of those cold mornings, they would take my sister and me to school in that sleigh, pulled by the team of horses—Buster and Blackie.

DePue: That leads to another question. I'm going to get back to the education here in a bit, but apparently you had draft horses on the farm when you were growing up as well.

Samuelson: Yeah. I didn't like them; they didn't like me. (laughter) We never got along very well. And we did have a Samson tractor, which was about as clunky a tractor as you would ever find—no power steering or anything like that. Years later, I found it was built in a plant in Janesville, Wisconsin that later became the General Motors plant. And we had that, but it would break down, so the two horses were basically our main source of power for farming on the farm. They'd pull the hay mower, and they'd pull the hay wagon, and they'd do most of the work.

DePue: Plowing?

Samuelson: Plowing, did that. Yep, they'd pull the plow; they'd pull the cultivator. They really were the main source of power, because that old Samson tractor didn't have a cultivator. It would pull a plow, but that was about it.

DePue: What was the primary source of income. Was it the dairy cattle?

Samuelson: The milk check. Milk check was the fifty-two-week source of income, but we grew tobacco. There are two areas in Wisconsin—south of Madison, near Stoughton, and then up in our area, which is east of La Crosse—and we would grow a cigar-type tobacco—binder-type, we would call it—that would be used as the wrapping for the cigars. And the worst crop that we could ever do. I counted it one time, and each tobacco plant was handled by hand sixteen times, from the time you pulled the plant of the tobacco bed where it started, planted it, hoed it, and all the other work that you did, and then by February, you would be in the tobacco stripping shed, where you'd strip the leaves from the stalks, put it in the bale. And then the

buyers would come out, and they'd open the bale, they'd pull out a leaf of tobacco, and they'd take a lighter, and if the tobacco flared, not very good; if it didn't burn, not very good; but if you saw that red flame—not flame, even, but just—

DePue: The glow?

Samuelson: —just the coal moving up the leaf, and that was the best quality. And I think the reason that a lot of those farmers did it, and I know in my dad's case, it was the reason, the check would come in time for the real-estate tax. So that way—I remember getting checks for 500 dollars, 530 dollars, for that year-long hard work with the tobacco plant. And of course, if you got any kind of a hailstorm during the growing season, it would wipe out tobacco, because if you had holes in the leaves, it didn't work.

DePue: You were growing up in a heavy dairy region. Was most of that milk used to produce cheese?

Samuelson: Butter and cheese, yeah. The cooperative creamery that we sent our milk to, they produced butter, and the milk they didn't use for butter, they would ship on to another factory that would do cheese. And then I had an uncle who had a small, rural cheese factory, and so I'd love to go there and spend time in the cheese factory with him, watching the milk turn to solids, and then the curds, and then finally, with the use of pressure, into forty-pound cheddar blocks and that sort of thing.

DePue: Sample the wares, did you?

Samuelson: Oh, always, particularly the curds. You know, they'd come flying out of that machine that would chop the cheese slabs into the curds. Yeah, ate a lot of curds.

DePue: You also mentioned you had hogs and chickens. And the number of chickens sounds like it wasn't just for your own use.

Samuelson: No, you'd take eggs to town, trade them for groceries, and that's basically what we did. The eggs we didn't use on the farm would be taken to town, and you'd trade them at the John Stone's Grocery Store, and they'd take eggs in payment for groceries.

DePue: Butcher your own hogs?

Samuelson: We butchered our own hogs, and we would also butcher—we could keep one or two beef animals, and we'd butcher one a year. And in those days, we again didn't have freezers, so my mother would can the pork in Mason jars, under pressure. She'd can the pork and can the beef, and that's how we kept it for the winter season.

DePue: Well, we can pick this thread up quite a bit later, I would think, but describe a typical hog at that time, because I suspect you had a lot more fat.

Samuelson: A lot more fat. Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And we weren't into a breeding program at that point. Again, it was some additional cash, because we'd sell the hogs at market time. And the quality at that time wasn't all that important, so you'd get a lot of fat on the meat. And the people at that time liked it. You know, they wanted bacon with fat on it, and they wanted to be able to render it so they'd get lard. We didn't have Crisco and the other cooking oils at that time, and so the fat would be taken off, rendered, and then you'd have lard to cook with.

DePue: Did your family do the rendering and use the lard as well?

Samuelson: Mm-hmm. Yeah, they did. Yeah, my mother would do that.

DePue: Can you discuss how they preserved that? I mean, you mentioned a couple things, but talk about that in a little more detail?

Samuelson: Once you render the fat and it turned into lard, we'd keep that in the basement, which was a little cooler. But that was easier to keep. It was the meat that was the challenge, and that's why my mother would cook it and put it into the Mason jars. Before we got electricity, we got a water cistern on the farm that was about thirty feet deep and only about ten feet of water in it, and so in the summertime, we'd put butter and milk and other perishables in a basket on the end of a rope, and then we'd drop that down into the cistern to keep it a little cooler than a refrigerator. When electricity came, it just literally changed everything.

DePue: Okay. I want to go back to the schools here, and you're tempting me with this electricity subject, and we will get back to that, I guarantee you. But talk about the schools and your impression of the quality of education you got in that one-room schoolhouse.

Samuelson: Well, I think it was very good. We dealt with the basics. I mean, you've heard reading, writing, and arithmetic, and that's pretty much what it was. I became a very good speller. I had excellent penmanship, because boy, you were taught, you do your O's, and you do all of this. And had some great teachers. And geography, which is another of my favorite subjects, and history. So it would basically be history and geography, arithmetic—that in grade school was addition, subtraction, long division, and multiplication—and you'd learn the tables. If they'd say, "Okay, what's four times nine?" you'd better know. And you were taught things that stay with you forever, at least as far as I'm concerned. The ethics that we have seen sort of disappear in the corporate world today, that was a big part of it. You do this honestly, and you do it—you can do business on a handshake, and if you shake on a business deal, that's as good as a signed contract. And you just learned what I call common sense.

You know, there'd be some fights, kids that get into fights and that sort of thing, but at the end, you'd always end up friends. And interestingly enough, the big fights would be John Deere versus Interna—Farmalls. You know, the kids with red tractors that are better than the

green tractors; kids whose family owned Ford cars, they're better than Chevy cars. (laughter) And those would be some of the fights that you'd get into, really, when they'd get a little tense. But you always ended up being friends. And we did a lot of cowboy and Indian playing because the school was right next to a forest with a lot of climbable trees, and you'd just have a lot of exercise.

DePue: What was the age spread that you had in that classroom?

Samuelson: Well, we had some eighth-graders that were seventeen and eighteen years old, and generally, first grade was six years old. But we had one family that had some learning challenges, and I remember they had one boy there who graduated from eighth grade when he was seventeen.

DePue: Did the older kids have a big role to play in helping the young kids learn their lessons?

Samuelson: Only on a family basis. You didn't see it so much in school, but there were some fairly large families. Ours wasn't; there were just my sister and me. But there were some families that would have five, six, seven, eight children, and there, I think the older kids worked with their siblings, their younger siblings. But as far as the rest of school, no, not a great deal. That was pretty much up to you—and you'd better not copy, or you'd get in trouble. If you tried to copy somebody's test paper, you would get into trouble—in those days, if—

DePue: That put a real burden on the teacher, though, trying to teach all those different age groups and the different levels of knowledge that she had to mold the lessons to, I would think.

Samuelson: Yeah, it was not an easy job, and many of the teachers went to a two-year teaching course. They would call them—well, in our case, it was Vernon County Normal Teaching Center—and in two years, you'd get a teaching certificate. And that's where a lot of them came from. But I was lucky; I just had some very good teachers, and they made it interesting. And in my case, I loved school. It made me really want to learn, and I love school. As I say, English and spelling, history, and geography. Wasn't much for geometry and that sort of area, but—

DePue: While you're sitting in that one-room schoolhouse, though, what did you see as your future?

Samuelson: Farming. I would continue—when Dad quit farming, I'd probably take over the farm and be as good a dairy farmer as I could. Yeah, that's all you saw, because really, that's where the world ended. You didn't see much beyond that. You know, you'd go to La Crosse, which I think was a town of 25,000 people, and you'd say, "Oh, that's way too crowded. I don't want to live there. Don't want to do that." (laughter)

DePue: Twenty-five thousand—that's a huge city, huh?

Samuelson: Yeah, it was then. It was a huge city.

DePue: Was religion important in your family?

Samuelson: Yes, yeah. We belonged the Brush Creek Lutheran Church, and that's where I was baptized and confirmed. And married in a Lutheran church in 1955. And at one point, seriously considered becoming a pastor—that was when I was twenty-five, twenty-four years old—but I didn't go to college. I had not gone to college, and so if I were to become a pastor, that meant four years of college, four years of seminary, and I just didn't think that I would be able to get that done, and so I just decided to be the best layman I can be, and so I've been as active as I can be in church. And my two children were adopted through Lutheran Social Services, so that gives me a very close personal connection there to my religion. But it was interesting, because if you were Norwegian, you were Lutheran, and if you were German-Irish, you were Catholic, and never the twain shall meet. In those days, you just didn't—aw. (laughter) The one time I think I made my mother cry was when she found out I had taken a Catholic cheerleader home from a basketball game. And she had me married and raising twelve kids for the Pope. (laughter) You know, it was just...

DePue: What language did they speak in your church?

Samuelson: The language was English, except on Christmas and Easter. The pastor was fluent in Norwegian, and so he would preach in Norwegian. And until I was eleven or twelve, I prayed the Lord's Prayer in Norwegian every night, and I can still do the Table Prayer in Norwegian. You had to learn Norwegian, because when your parents and grandparents talked about things they didn't want you to know, you had to, in self defense, learn, so you knew what they were talking about. Because my grandparents spoke Norwegian 90 percent of the time. So I did understand it much better than I was able to speak it—and I really can't read it at all. But you get to be twelve years old, and then it was not—other kids made fun of you if you didn't speak English, so you kind of put it aside.

DePue: I wonder if the kids growing up with that had an accent, though?

Samuelson: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, there's—(with accent) eh, Norwegians do have an accent, you know. We do talk this way when we have to, and when I tell Ole-Lena stories, why then, yeah. Ole and Lena, when they talk to each other, that's how they talk to each other.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the holidays. You mentioned Christmas and Easter. I was wondering if you had lutefisk and lefse.

Samuelson: Oh, we had lutefisk and lefse at Christmastime, and we would have ham at Eastertime. Christmas was a very special time. There was a program at the church, and I can still remember being told by my parents, "Now, you talk loud enough that we can hear you." And when I was six years old, standing in front of that congregation, it looked like it was bigger than Yankee Stadium, and when I've gone back to worship in that church—and it's still there—I think there were twelve rows of pews, and it really

wasn't very large. But it sure looked big when you were a kid, six years old. We would have family gatherings. As a matter of fact, socially, having company at the house was always an exciting time. Playing cards—certain kinds of cards, because our Lutheran pastor didn't think we should dance, and there were some cards we should not play.

DePue: Well, what card games did they play?

Samuelson: We played Rook, and we played 500, and Euchre, and those were the cards that we could play, but if it were to go toward anything that resembled gambling then, no—no way.

DePue: But Euchre is a lively game, is it not?

Samuelson: Oh, it is. Yeah, and we'd play it on the school bus. Going in the morning and coming home at night, we'd sit and play Euchre.

DePue: Okay. We're at the point where I want to get into two very important parts of your life, and one was the illness that you alluded to, and the other is rural electrification. And both of those are going to take a little bit of time to tell, and so we probably should explain here, we're doing these interviews and then breaking because you have a real job to do, and it was at—

Samuelson: Hourly market reports, but I've got another ten minutes.

DePue: Ten minutes. Okay, let's talk about getting into high school and then getting thrown a serious curve ball.

Samuelson: I graduated from eighth grade, and that summer was working on the farm, but I was graduated about high school because, as I say, I loved school. And I was a tall kid, so I was going to play basketball. The school wasn't big enough to have a football team, but we did have basketball and baseball, and I was excited about that, looking forward to it. But early in the summer, I started experiencing pain in my left hip, and it got worse rather quickly, and it felt like something had come out of joint. Well, my folks believed in chiropractors, and so they took me to three or four chiropractors who were all going to cure me, and it just continually got worse. And by August, they decided something else had to be done.

So we drove to La Crosse, and we went to St. Francis Hospital, met Dr. Walter Jones, and he said, "We'll take X-rays." And in those days, you had to wait a while. So they took the X-rays, and they say, "Okay, you and your parents go out to eat." I had left the farm that morning figuring I'd be back that night. And so when we came back from having dinner—which is what we called the noontime meal—Dr. Jones walked into the waiting room, and he said, "I wish there was another way I could tell you this, young man, but" he said, "you're not going to walk for two years." I looked at him and said, "What do you mean, I'm not going to walk for two years?" He said, "You're not going to walk for two years. As a matter of fact," he said, "you have Leg Perthes Disease," and then he went on to explain that basically it's a decaying of the bone that goes from the thigh

to the hip ball that fits into the socket. And he said, "Your leg is already shortening," and he said, "I want to put you in the hospital right now." I was stunned. But he said, "You and your parents talk about it." It was the only time that I saw my dad cry. So we talked about it and agreed that if he said we'd better get going on this, we'd better do it.

So I was put in the hospital that day and was there for three weeks with a twenty-pound weight on my leg, and from there on, it was a cast—a body cast—for six weeks, and then a wheelchair for three to four months, and then finally crutches. And it was just a terrible time. I mean, it was the worst possible thing. I said, "God, why me?" So anyway, finally got me home after three weeks and set up a bed, and I'm in this cast—no air conditioning in Wisconsin in August—pretty hot.

And it was during that time that Robert Gehring, the vocational agriculture teacher at the high school, made it a point to drive out to meet all of his students—incoming freshmen—to encourage them to take agriculture courses and be an FFA member and that sort of thing. So when he pulled in, I didn't know who he was. I noticed right away he had an artificial arm. And he introduced himself, and he said, "I'm here to welcome you to school." I snapped at him, and I said, "Well, you're wasting your time. I'm not going to be in school for two years." So he said, "Well, tell me why," and I did. So we talked, and I learned that when he was six, he'd lost an arm in an accident—farm accident. And he was a rather mild, almost meek person sometimes. The students took advantage of him a lot when I finally got to school.

But he finally said, "Well," he said, "do you think you can study by yourself?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Can you study without students around you and do that type of work?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, but I think so." He said, "Well, if you think you can," he said, "I will make the five-mile trip out from town two or three times a week, I'll bring the assignments from the other high school teachers, and I'll take your finished work in so that you don't have to fall behind." Because that was my other concern. You know, I had real good friends who were in eighth grade, and we were going in together. And he said, "That way, when you're back on your feet, why, you'll all be the same year; you won't have to graduate later and that sort of thing." So that's what happened. And he brought the assignments out, took the finished work back, the teachers graded it and all that.

And I'm listening to radio. I'm listening to Bert Wilson do the Chicago Cub games. And the more I listened, although I was about as bashful, barefoot country boy as you could find, the more I thought, You know, that sounds like maybe something I could do. Because I knew I couldn't do the heavy farming because the doctor said, "You have to be very careful, because it could be reactivated if you take a severe jolt." So Mr. Gehring said, "Well, when you're back on your feet, we'll get you into public speaking."

So my junior year, I was back in school, and got me into FFA public speaking, and by my senior year, I was good. Oh, man, I was good. And I was one of five regional finalists in the Wisconsin state FFA public speaking contest, and I went to that convention knowing, "Man, I'm going to win this for my little high school." And I came in fourth out of five. I just got the pants beat off me. And so when it was finished, I said to my teacher, I said, "Gee, what did we do wrong?" And he said, "Well, let's look at it," he said, "because in this case, you'll learn from losing. You know, you look at it, and you learn." So that is really how I got started. I look back on that whole incident, and the one thing it taught me was, Don't evaluate a happening when it happens; give it some time. Because what was a tragedy at the time just totally changed my entire life—totally changed it—because had that not happened, I'd probably be milking cows today in Wisconsin—and be happy. But that took that future away from me and opened a world that I could never ever have imagined.

So the one interesting footnote to the story: I talk about Mr. Gehring a lot when I talk to FFA kids and young people. Again, saying, you know, Don't evaluate a happening when it happens, and teach your vo-ag teacher with respect, (laughter) because man, they do good work. But I said, I lost track of him. I knew where the high school basketball coach was who let me do the PA announcing at basketball games when I got back on my feet, but I lost track of Mr. Gehring. So I think it was around '98 or '99, I said to my sister—who still lives up there—I said, "Can you help me find him?" She tracked him down and found him in Milwaukee—retired. And when she called, she said, "I'm Norma, and my brother Orion were students when you were at Ontario High School." "Oh yeah," he said. "Yeah," he said, "I remember." He said, "What's Orion doing?" (laughter) And I loved it. I loved it. He had no idea that I was doing what I was doing and that he'd had a difference. So I talked to him, and we had a nice conversation. But it changed my life.

DePue: And I'm sure that after all those years, you telling him your story, that had to really warm his heart.

Samuelson: I think it did. Yeah. I hope it did, because he just played a major role. Outside of my parents, he had more influence on my life and my career than anybody I know.

DePue: Have we got a couple of minutes left here?

Samuelson: A couple.

DePue: You mentioned that this shook your faith, or at least it caused you to wonder about what God had in mind. A few years down the road, how were you looking at that?

Samuelson: I guess the way I look at it now. You know, it was a life-changing activity. As I say, it taught me never to evaluate a happening when it happens. Give it some time. There's a reason for it. And in my case, it was a major

reason. It scares me to think what I might have missed had I not been able to do what I'm doing now.

DePue: So this is what you were meant to do?

Samuelson: Well, I decided I wanted to be a radio announcer before my voice changed, so God was good to me, because he gave me—you know, you never hear yourself the way other people hear you, because I don't hear anything special about my voice, but thank God other people do, and it's the thing that's recognized more than anything else, really. If I'm in a checkout counter at a supermarket and I say something, somebody will turn around, "Oh, my golly." So he gave me a good voice; I just try to use it.

DePue: We'd better get you to the market report, and we'll pick this up with rural electrification.

Samuelson: Okay, very good.

(Pause in recording)

DePue: We're in our second session with Orion Samuelson. Orion, the last we heard about was this very difficult disease that you had and how that changed your life. That was in the early part of your high school years. A couple other things that were important for you during those high schools, I would think—1948. And in fact, you remember the specific day. Why don't you tell us what that—

Samuelson: April eleventh. And as I tell people today, there are certain dates in our life that are important—birthdays, wedding anniversaries—but for me, an important day was April 11, 1948. That's the day that the Rural Electric Co-Op came to our farm and hooked us up to electricity. And I'm sure this was duplicated many times over, all over the country, and many times prior to when we got electricity, because they were ready to hook us up just before World War II broke out, and when the war broke out, copper was taken for the war effort, and so there was no wire available, and so we weren't able to get the farm wired for electricity, and the Rural Electric said, you know, "We're not able to do much in the way of adding new farm customers." So it took a while after the war ended before we got back to manufacturing wire and getting the farm wired, the barn and the house.

And so April 11 of 1948, they hooked us up, and it literally changed our life. Literally. My mother threw away these heavy flatirons that she'd use to iron. We got a refrigerator. No longer had to put perishables in the basket at the end of the rope in the cistern. I was able to stand at the foot of the stairs, flick a switch, and there was light in the upstairs bedroom. And we no longer had to milk cows by hand; we got a milking machine. We no longer had to put cans of milk into cold water to keep fresh; we now had a milk cooler that we could do that. And it just changed everything for us. You know, that had to be repeated time and

again across America. I think the Rural Electric Co-Ops that brought power to rural America probably brought the biggest cultural change in the history of rural America, because it just so totally changed lives and made work a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable. And I suddenly had a radio that you didn't have to worry about a battery going dead on you and not being able to replace it. And I like music, and until that happened, one of my great Christmas gifts was a small box wind-up phonograph, where I'd play these 78 rpm records; now I had an electric phonograph. It just totally changed everything.

DePue: A lot of these things you're talking about, though, would have been expensive, I would think, for a family farm to deal with.

Samuelson: They were, but at that time—well, it's difficult to relate to the difference in price today compared to then because of inflation and that sort of thing. But yes, they were not cheap. I think probably the most expensive thing we bought was the milking machine, and that was considered absolutely vital to get, because milking was a tough job. And so the milking machine was really the biggest buy that we made. Refrigerator wasn't cheap, but—

DePue: That was something that was purchased upfront?

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah. The refrigerator was waiting; the milking machine wasn't, because we wanted to make sure we knew where the power outlets would be, and that sort of thing. And you know, there were cows that never did learn how to take a milking machine, and it was my job to milk those cows by hand. That's why I am the five-time Illinois State Fair cow milking champion. (laughter) These hands—don't mess with them. They're very good. So I would do the hand-milking of the cows that would not take it, but then as the younger cows came online, they were not accustomed to hand-milking, and so the milking machine was readily accepted by them. But it just made a tremendous difference.

DePue: I would think the other thing that would have happened maybe about the same time was getting—moving on from the draft animals and getting mechanization.

Samuelson: Actually, we got—on a May morning in 1939, a Farmall F-20 tractor.

DePue: So not too much longer after that.

Samuelson: No, no. So we took delivery on the tractor. Again, just before the war, rubber wasn't available, so it was on steel plugs. After the war, we took those wheels off and put rubber tires on the tractor. But that was a tractor with—you started it by cranking—there wasn't a starter on it—and you were able to get a cultivator that would fit on it, and a hay baler and all the other things that we didn't have before. But you didn't get most of that stuff until after the war, because again, factories were making war material and not farm machinery. That tractor, Dad paid $720 cash for it in 1939. The folks sold the farm in 1964 at an auction, and sold the equipment and the cows and everything. The tractor at auction brought $740. So that was

not a bad investment. The tractor has been restored now, by people in the International Harvester collectors' world, and so it has been restored and looks better than it did when it came off the truck in 1939 when it was delivered. But it's a tractor where as soon as my legs were long enough and strong enough, I drove, and my sister drove, and my mother and father drove. All of us spent a good part of our working days on that tractor in one way or another, and it performed very well.

DePue: Did you say 1939 is when you got that tractor?

Samuelson: Nineteen thirty-nine.

DePue: Okay, I heard you wrong the first time, then.

Samuelson: Yeah, 1939, and that's the reason we couldn't get rubber tires, because we were going into the war years, and so...

DePue: Looking back, though, which would you rank as the biggest impact? Mechanization—getting that tractor—or electrification?

Samuelson: Electrification.

DePue: Why?

Samuelson: Well, because it affected your entire life. The tractor mechanization was just the farming part of your life, but rural electrification was culturally and socially and agriculturally beneficial. It went far beyond just farming, which is, you know, what the tractor did. And the tractor, you didn't use every day of the year, and electricity was there every day. I still think electrification is the biggest cultural change in rural America.

DePue: How about plumbing? Did you grow up with outdoor plumbing?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. We had a two-holer, or as we described it, we had four rooms and a path. And we never did have indoor plumbing as long as I was on the farm. Never did. Dad didn't think you ought to go to the bathroom in the house, and that was just his feeling. (laughs) So we didn't.

DePue: Well, one of the things that you think about growing up on the farm, then, you've got all these farm kids going to the one-room schoolhouse—everybody was a farmer, I would think, in that one-room schoolhouse—

Samuelson: True.

DePue: —how did you keep yourself clean? How did you do that? Because you were working hard.

Samuelson: Saturday night bath in a galvanized bathtub. And as we said, we took a bath once a week, whether we needed it or not. (laughs)

DePue: Where'd they heat up the water?

Samuelson: On the stove, they would have a boiler, and they would heat the water in the boiler. It was a Saturday night ritual.

DePue: And what was the stove? Was it a wood-burning stove?

Samuelson: Wood-burning stove. As a matter of fact, Kalamazoo, Michigan is forever engrained in my mind, because that wood cookstove on one end of it had a reservoir, and the base of the cookstove was in enamelware, almost porcelain-like, but it was made by the Kalamazoo Stove Company in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and those letters were raised on that. And as a kid, I can remember K-A—tracing it all with my finger.

DePue: I would assume that you cut your own firewood, the family did.

Samuelson: Mm-hmm. It's all we burned. We didn't burn coal, and we had woods on the farm, so we had—we—that'd be part of your fall work once you were done harvesting, then you would cut trees and trim them and pull them in, and then you'd saw them. And matter of fact, there were threshing runs, and there were silo-filling runs, where one person would own the threshing machine, one person would own the silo filler. Well, there was a person who owned the woodcutting rig, and they'd go from farm to farm. So when you'd get oh, probably twenty or thirty trees gathered in one place, they'd bring in the rig and would saw it up into firewood.

DePue: Saw it and split it as well?

Samuelson: Saw it and split it. Yeah, so that's all we had. And on the cold mornings and the really cold days of winter, we would sleep in the front room, as we called it, on the floor, because we had a wood heater, and so that way, you'd keep it stoked all night. When it wasn't quite as cold, then you'd sleep in the bedroom, and by, you know, ten o'clock at night, the fire had gone out. So in my case, I'd take my clothes to bed with me and have them under the covers so when I got up to get dressed, why, at least they'd be warm.

DePue: The lifestyle you're describing here is so foreign to any of us today—

Samuelson: Oh, my kids and grandkids. Oh, absolutely.

DePue: How much time was there for leisure when you were growing up?

Samuelson: As I say, we'd probably go to a movie maybe once every two months, and a lot of the social life centered around the church. We'd have the Ladies Aid church dinners on Sunday, and there was an organization for kids called Luther League, and we'd be involved in that. And then once you got into high school, there were basketball games, and then Ontario, Wisconsin—527 people—on Saturday nights, the merchants would show black-and-white free movies in the village square and keep the stores open until 9:00. So the farmers would come in and do their shopping and then sit out in the square and watch the movies, and that sort of thing. You made your own entertainment.

DePue: Was 4-H or FFA a part of your life in those high school years?

Samuelson: Both 4-H and FFA. I credit both of them, I think—and I'm deeply involved in both of them today. I'm a member of the board of trustees of the National 4-H Council, and I've been very active over the years in FFA,

because they both played an important role in my life in the public speaking—4-H public speaking, FFA public speaking—that took me away from this scared-to-death farm kid in front of three people to talking to millions of people today.

DePue: That was one of the questions I had from our last session. What was it about broadcasting that appealed to you if you're this—you'd describe yourself as shy, perhaps. You certainly had a rather confining world that you were living in. Why broadcasting?

Samuelson: Well, I can remember being on crutches, and there were two or three kids from another family that were singers, and so they would perform for community clubs and things like that, and then they would ask me if I would maybe introduce them and do things like that, and I did, and enjoyed it. And then I won a talent contest at the Viroqua Theater in Viroqua, Wisconsin, singing Scandinavian-dialect songs that had been recorded by Yogi Yorgesson. And I won ten silver dollars when I won that contest.

DePue: How old were you then?

Samuelson: I was still on crutches, so I was probably fourteen. And that's when, I think, I was bitten by the showbiz bug, and it was fun, and the applause was fun. That's why today, I enjoy—I probably do forty or fifty speeches a year across the country, because I thoroughly enjoy it. A lot of people in the broadcasting business are not comfortable in front of a live audience; they are much more comfortable in the studio with a producer and an engineer, but I loved doing the appearances because you know right away if they like you or if they don't like you. So it was about that time that it kind of bit me.

DePue: Okay. Going back to the 4-H and FFA, could you describe very quickly the difference between the two organizations?

Samuelson: 4-H was generally younger. You started in 4-H when you were nine, and you could stay in until you were twenty-one. And it was social and cultural. I had these projects. I had a dairy calf, I had two registered Berkshire hogs, and then I did some poultry as 4-H projects, whereas FFA was more the educational—strictly educational. There wasn't a lot of social activity. But again, it was FFA public speaking that took me to the state finals, where I lost badly.

DePue: Do you remember the subject?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah, I remember it very well. Matter of fact, an interesting story: the subject—this was 1951—and original oration. You wrote it, memorized it, and delivered it, and then three judges would ask questions after you had made the presentation. And my subject was "Will unions work in agriculture?" which at that time was a rather controversial subject to talk about. And I think I got probably 95, 98 percent of my delivery, but in the

questions, there was one judge who just really hammered me on why did I think this would work, and did this make sense, and so on and so forth.

DePue: You were arguing that unions could work in agriculture?

Samuelson: Yeah, that they could. And he just didn't think they could, and so we kind of went back and forth on that. About seven years later, I'm at a meeting of livestock producers—the Equity Livestock Association—and I'm sitting next to a gentleman, and his name is Pete May, and we get acquainted, and we started talking, and the subject came up that I'd been in FFA public speaking, in the state finals. He said, "You know, I judged one of those once." (laughter) Well, the rest of the story is he was the judge who hammered me. So we had a good laugh over that (laughs) because he said, "You know, you delivered it well, Orion, but," he said, "the premise was not all that good." I said, "You know, that's fine. I learned." (laughs)

DePue: Did you have cause to change your opinion on the subject later on?

Samuelson: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. Yeah. I've changed my opinion on many things over the years. That's why I don't understand the world of politics today, where you can't change your mind; if you said this twenty years ago, you can't change your mind today. I think if you're going to keep up with the times, you change your mind a good deal over the years.

DePue: Were Extension Services—those people helpful to you?

Samuelson: Yeah, there was a 4-H club agent in Vernon County, and he was very helpful. He would come out to the meetings. And then they'd hold county-wide meetings. If you were in the dairy project, they'd help you with dairy judging, because that would be a part of it. You'd go to the fair, and you'd be on judging teams, and you would compete with other 4-H clubs and that sort of thing. And the Extension people were very good. They were like Mr. Gehring the vo-ag teacher; they were personable, and they were helpful.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the organization and the purpose of the Extension Services then.

Samuelson: Co-Operative Extension Service has been along for a long time—goes back to when Abraham Lincoln was president and signed the Land-Grant Act that established land-grant colleges and universities, and since not everybody could go to that university or that college, they developed programs that would come to, in the rural communities, the farms, and so they called it the Extension—the Co-Operative Extension Service. It has broadened tremendously at that time. At that time, it was basically to help farmers and ranchers with production education. And then 4-H, which is 103 years old, was also a part of Extension. But then—

DePue: It was a formal relationship between the two?

Samuelson: Oh yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah. The 4-H programs were and are conducted by people in the Extension—and a lot of volunteer leaders who aren't involved in it. But today, Extension, there's a huge staff in Cook County, Illinois, for example. We have 4-H clubs in the city; we have senior citizens who need nutrition help, who need financial management help. We have young parents who perhaps need childcare help. I've said, and I'm a strong supporter of Extension, that Extension Service as an agency probably touches the lives more directly of more people than any other agency I know. And whether it's through 4-H or whether a senior citizen nutrition program, it's hands-on.

And Extension Service has struggled because of the budgetary restrictions, and back in the late nineties, when federal budget cuts affected a lot of states like Illinois, it did that to the point that the Farm Bureau and some other organizations in Illinois said, We have to do something about finding additional funding to replace what the federal budget has taken. And so Senator Paul Simon and I were asked to co-chair a task force to figure out how we could get more funding for Extension work. So we did. We chaired a task force for six months, and from that has come an organization called Extension Partners, organized in every county, that now lobbies state legislators, and federal whenever possible, to get more funding, and we were very successful back in the early part of this century. Now, with the extreme budget problems for states all over, it's more challenging, but we did restore funding and get more people on staff to do the work that Extension does.

DePue: Your description of this when we began is that this is an extension of the land-grant colleges, so in the case of Illinois, it's the University of Illinois?

Samuelson: University of Illinois Co-Operative Extension Service.

DePue: Do all the people then work directly for the university?

Samuelson: Work directly for the university, but salaries are kind of spread out over the county where they are, because a lot of counties have tax programs to help support Extension, and so the paycheck comes from two or three different sources, but all under the guidance of the University of Illinois.

DePue: Most counties in Illinois would have an Extension office, then?

Samuelson: Yes, yes.

DePue: And those are the agents that work directly with the communities, with the students in the 4-H and...?

Samuelson: And then there are the regional specialty people, like at the University of Illinois, you'll have somebody in animal science, and they'll be assigned a region of the state where there are cattle or hog producers, and they'll go out and conduct meetings and educational programs. So you have the regional specialists in addition to the county personnel.

DePue: Okay. One of the people we interviewed early in this project was Doug Parrott, if you recognize that name.

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. I recognize the name. Sure, yeah.

DePue: And he has a love for teaching those kids how to evaluate cattle and hogs and sheep and... For Wisconsin, was it the University of Wisconsin that was the land-grant college?

Samuelson: University of Wisconsin, yeah. Indiana, it's Purdue, and in Iowa, it's Iowa State that's the land-grant universities.

DePue: Okay. You get close to finishing up high school, and you've already told us that your career plans had to change. What was your thoughts when you graduated from high school?

Samuelson: When I graduated from high school, I was in a graduating class of, I guess, twenty-six. I was salutatorian, and as salutatorian, you received a one-year scholarship to the University of Wisconsin. So I enrolled in the University of Wisconsin. I wanted to take broadcasting. They weren't teaching broadcasting; they were teaching journalism. After three weeks at the university, living in a little room three stories up in a house and being just really homesick and getting only books on journalism, I thought, "This is not what I want to do. I'm not a writer. I don't want to write; I want to talk," and there was no way I was going to get that kind of an education there. So we didn't have a telephone on the farm, but we had relatives in town, so I called them, and I said, "I have to talk to my folks, and so if you can let them know and they can come in sometime in the next couple of days, I'll call and talk." So we did, and I said, "I don't want to do this. I'm not getting what I want."

Well, as you know, as I look back on that, it was probably one of the most difficult decisions that my folks had to make. My dad had a sixth-grade education; my mother had two years of college. And so now their firstborn has a year's scholarship to the university—hey, this is a big deal—and now he doesn't want to go. What's this all about? So they finally said, "Well, you take the bus home this weekend, and we'll talk about it." So we did, and we—after a lengthy discussion, my dad said, "Well, you find a place that will teach you to be a radio announcer, and we'll let you drop out of the university."

So I did. I found a school in Minneapolis called the American Institute of the Air that in six months taught you to be a radio announcer and taught you to write commercials and news. It also taught you how to pronounce fifty of the most difficult classical music composers' names (laughter) in the world, and I did it well. I haven't said them since, but I did it well. (laughter) And so I went to that school for six months, and before the six months was over, I was doing a—I would drive home from Minneapolis every weekend and do a program on a daytime radio station—a music program—and that station was seventeen miles from the

farm. So when I graduated from the broadcast school in August of '52 on a Friday, on Monday I went to work full-time at WKLJ in Sparta, Wisconsin.

DePue: Let me go back here a couple of times, and I wanted to ask you before—your medical condition and spending a few weeks in the hospital, and then everything else afterwards, that long rehabilitation you had, my guess is your parents didn't have health insurance—

Samuelson: Oh, no. No.

DePue: —that this was very difficult for them financially as well.

Samuelson: Yeah, it was. Now, hospital bills then weren't like they are today, but—

DePue: But this was also during the Second World War, was it?

Samuelson: This would have been after that. The war would have been over for three years—or for two years. And I don't really remember how they paid for it, but yeah, there was no such thing as insurance. My dad had no life insurance and no medical insurance.

DePue: Were the World War II years good years for American agriculture?

Samuelson: Yes, they were. Yeah. Because we farmed all-out to feed the Army. That was the whole mission. And that's why people like my dad were not drafted, because he was an active farmer, and he was needed on the farm to produce food. So he was listed—they had a special category, it wasn't 4-F for physical—but it was an exemption for people who were food producers.

DePue: And the United States is not just feeding the American population at that time, but Europe and—

Samuelson: Yeah, and feeding—well, of course, feeding the military. And that's why, when the war ended, the agricultural economy collapsed, because we had this tremendous production, and then suddenly, we weren't using that much overseas. So in the late forties, the agricultural economy really collapsed.

DePue: Well, the reason I thought about this question at this point in the conversation was I'm wondering if your parents helped foot the bill to go to the American Institute of the Air.

Samuelson: They did, but I worked. I worked in a filling station in Minneapolis and was able to—I think I paid half of what it cost. And I think the six-month course was something like 1,400 dollars. And I worked every night, because school would go from 7:00 in the morning until 2:00 in the afternoon, and then I would go to work at a Shell gas station and pump gas. (laughs)

DePue: Do you remember what the paycheck was at WKLJ, now that you've hit the big time?

Samuelson: (laughs) Fifty dollars a week is my pay when I started, and then they turned me loose to sell, and so I would get 10 percent of every commercial that I sold, and I think the price of a commercial on WKLJ, as I recall, was four dollars for a minute, so I'd get 10 percent of that for whatever I would sell. But I was learning, and I was doing something I loved. And it was a daytime station, seventeen miles from home, so I'd get up in the morning, milk cows, change clothes, go to town and be a radio announcer, and then I'd get home in the evening in time to milk cows again.

DePue: And where was the station?

Samuelson: Sparta, Wisconsin, home of Camp McCoy. (laughs) A lot of people—

DePue: I've spent many years—a lot of summers at Fort McCoy. Yeah, same place. Sparta and Tomah. Well, that brings us to the question of military service, and I think I know the answer here.

Samuelson: Yeah, I was drafted and went to Fort Snelling in Minneapolis for three days of physical, and at the end of three days, they said, "No, we don't want to touch this," because the doctor said any kind of a severe jolt could reactivate it, and so the military said, "We don't want to you be on a medical pension for us the rest of your life," so it was 4-F. You know, I was ready to serve, but that pretty much set the tone for my life. I didn't have the uncertainty of what I was going to be doing militarily and that sort of thing, so that's what happened.

DePue: Where did you go after Sparta?

Samuelson: Sparta, it was on to Appleton, Wisconsin, WHBY. I spent two years in Sparta, and the gentleman who got me the job at Sparta was from Ontario. He was a morning radio personality, and very good—Clyde Downing was his name—and then he moved to WHBY in Appleton, and about two months later, he called me and said, "Hey, there's an opening here for nighttime staff announcer." So he said, "Why don't you come over and apply?" And I did, and got that job in '54.

DePue: What kind of jobs does the nighttime staff announcer have to do?

Samuelson: Well, the Mutual Network did part of our programming, so I'd do the station breaks, but then at 10:30 in the evening, I did a ninety-minute disc jockey show called *Music 'til Midnight*—would take phone requests from high school kids and play the records they wanted to hear, and be done at midnight, and I'd work from six 'til midnight. And then I'd go to a restaurant and help them clean up, because that paid me a little additional money. And on Friday nights, I worked at a clothing store in their formalwear department, and I was probably responsible for more ill-fitting tuxedo's at weddings (laughter) than anybody on the planet.

DePue: Orrin, none of this sounds like agriculture to me.

Samuelson: It wasn't at that point. It wasn't. But in 1956, after doing the disc jockey work at Appleton, that station was owned by the St. Norbertine fathers

who have St. Norbert's college in De Pere. They also owned WBAY radio and television in Green Bay.

DePue: A bigger market.

Samuelson: Bigger market. In 1956, that station was a pioneer in farm television. They, Monday through Friday, did a one-hour live program in the studio with a band, and it was purely agriculture. And they had two farm broadcasters working there and a third one who left, so they needed somebody to come and take that position. And the general manger who hired me at Appleton had moved on to the station in Green Bay, and he remembered I grew up on a farm, and so he called me, and he said, "What do you think about working up here on the TV station and the radio station and doing agricultural programming." I said, "Hey, it's right down my alley. Be happy to." So in '56, I moved up there, and we did two hours of radio in the morning and then that hour at noon, Monday through Friday, and then a fifteen-minute show on television on Sunday. And we were pioneers in farm television.

DePue: All of this was strictly agricultural, then?

Samuelson: Strictly agricultural. On that show at noon, we'd drive tractors into the studio and do live commercials on the benefits of the tractor. We had 4-H kids bring in hogs and steers into the studio and show how to fit them and how to feed them and get them ready for the show ring. And we would go out to meetings with a Bell and Howell sixteen millimeter silent camera, and we'd shoot film, bring it back to the station, run it through the processor, and once it was processed, then we'd do our own editing, or splicing and editing, and put it together. And when we didn't shoot movie film, we'd take black-and-white Polaroid camera, and we'd line up the new officers of the Dairy Association and take their picture, and we'd put it in front of a TV camera—cameras that were five times bigger than the cameras that we're using right now. (laughs) And did that for four years and just learned a tremendous amount of programming agriculture for television and radio.

DePue: It wasn't just yourself, though, that went to Green Bay, was it? You were married at that time?

Samuelson: Oh, I was married at the time, yeah. Well, actually, Appleton. Yeah, I was married when I was in Appleton, 1955.

DePue: Tell us just a little bit about that.

Samuelson: Well, my wife had graduated from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, was a schoolteacher, and we were married in '55. That was a year after I got to Appleton.

DePue: And her name?

Samuelson: Her name was Nancy.

DePue: The last name?

Samuelson: Peterson. Hey, Scandinavian, you know. Lutheran—no Catholic there—Lutheran.

DePue: I was born in Decorah, by the way.

Samuelson: Oh, were you really?

DePue: Yeah.

Samuelson: Great Norwegian community—

DePue: Yeah, absolutely.

Samuelson: —and museum there. So anyway, yeah, so she taught school, and I worked there, and then when I got transferred to Green Bay, we continued to live in Appleton, and she finished out the school year and then moved to Green Bay as well.

DePue: Did you have all those extra jobs when you were in Green Bay?

Samuelson: No, I didn't. No—

DePue: Did that mean that you were getting paid a little bit better?

Samuelson: I was making $800 a month.

DePue: In 1956.

Samuelson: Nineteen fifty-six.

DePue: And put that into scale where people can comprehend today.

Samuelson: In that Green Bay Market today, 8,000 dollars a year—or ten—year, 8,000, today would probably pay sixty, seventy.

DePue: So finally, you'd arrived. You're making a comfortable living, then.

Samuelson: Oh, I thought I was making a good living, and that led to an interesting exchange when I moved to WGN. But yeah, hey, I was in the big time. As a matter of fact, I built a house. I built a two-story, four-bedroom house in Green Bay and rented out the house that I bought when we moved up there. So hey, I was a big fish in a little pond.

DePue: I thought I heard that you mentioned a band here at Green Bay as well. That was part of the show?

Samuelson: Part of the show. Cousin Fuzzy and the Cousins.

DePue: (laughs) I like it.

Samuelson: You know, that's polka country. That's polka country. Yeah, we would do live polka shows. I mean, we had Whoopee John, and Harold Loeffelmacher and the Six Fat Dutchmen, and Romey Gosz and the Goslings, and Cousin Fuzzy and the cousins, and Lawrence Duchow and the Red Raven Orchestra, Frankie Yankovic and the Yanks—we had all these big bands. (laughter)

DePue: And all these names are just rolling right off your tongue here.

Samuelson: Well, when I started in Sparta, I was a polka disc jockey, so I know them all.

DePue: Now there's something that people would really have a hard time understanding today, I think.

Samuelson: (laughs) Well, it was a lot of fun, and that was the one social event in Ontario, Wisconsin. We had a community hall, and Saturday night, there would be these bands that would come and play for dances. And one of the best bands we had was Les Hartmann and the Iowa Cornhuskers. And later, at WGN, I worked with two members of that band who joined us on the barn dance. (laughs)

DePue: Wow.

Samuelson: Small world.

DePue: Okay, anything else you want to mention about your years in Green Bay, because it sounds like those are important years for you.

Samuelson: They were. They were very important years. I made my first trip to Chicago because the National Association of Farm Broadcasters—then known as the National Association of Farm Directors—I joined that in 1956. And their annual meeting would always be held at the Conrad Hilton in Chicago at the same time that the National 4-H Congress was at the Hilton, and the International Livestock Show was out at the stockyards, at the Amphitheater. So as a farm broadcaster, you'd come to Chicago, you'd do your business at the Farm Broadcasters' Convention, but then you, as a news person, would cover the 4-H Congress, do your interviews with the 4-H kids, and you'd do your interviews at the International Livestock Show. And I would just move into the Hilton for a whole week. And I think from 1957 until 1974, I spent every Thanksgiving Day out at the International Amphitheater. It was opening day for the International Livestock Show, and so that was a very important Chicago event. So before I came to WGN to work, I was coming down here to go to those meetings. And in Green Bay, it was the first time I had gone to Washington, D.C., and that's when I met Dwight Eisenhower, our president at the time, and Ezra Taft Benson, the secretary of agriculture who later became the leader of the Mormon Church. So yeah, that was the beginning of a very exciting time for me.

DePue: That was a business trip out in Washington, D.C.?

Samuelson: Business, yeah.

DePue: And what was the explicit purpose of that?

Samuelson: The purpose was the Farm Broadcasters would hold two meetings a year. They'd hold the November annual meeting in Chicago, and then they'd hold a summer meeting at various locations. And so it was a summer meeting in Washington, D.C., and we went to the White House, and we spent time with the secretary. And oh, what an eye-opener that was for me.

I mean, hey, I'm now in the nation's capital, where decisions are made, and to this day, I get excited every time I fly into D.C. I find it to be an exciting city.

DePue: So when you're talking to the secretary of agriculture at that time, are you listening or are you giving advice or recommendations?

Samuelson: Listening. Listening, interviewing, because at that time, the big farm program was the Soil Bank, taking acres out of production so that we would have less production, and as a result, higher prices. So I was in awe, really, for me to be on the front lawn of the White House—not realizing that years later, I would be a dinner guest at the White House for a salute to agriculture. It was a trip I've never forgotten.

DePue: You said that WBAY in Green Bay were pioneers. How were they pioneers?

Samuelson: They were doing more television than any station in the country focused on agriculture. There were some other stations, a station in Topeka, that was doing I think a half-hour weekly show, but when it came to doing agricultural television on a daily basis, and doing the things that we did. Going out—because I think before I left, we went out and did the Wisconsin State Fair on television, and that was not a cheap situation. And you just didn't find any other station that was doing that. And as a result, when we'd come to the Farm Broadcasters' meeting, anybody who was in television or thinking of doing farm television, they talked to us. Bob Parker, who was the farm director; Les Sturmer, who was the number two man; and then myself. And by the time I came to Chicago in '60, I was the farm director because both Bob and Les had moved on to other positions.

DePue: I'm surprised. Is this just the local market that they're meeting there?

Samuelson: Yep. But it was an important dairy market—Northeastern Wisconsin, with good coverage. And it was a moneymaker.

DePue: That was my next question. The thing that surprises me is you think about important agricultural areas, and you'd say, Well, Iowa would be a natural, Illinois, perhaps areas of Pennsylvania or California—and Wisconsin, you don't think is as heavily agricultural as some of those other places. But it was the dairy connection, you think?

Samuelson: The dairy connection. Bob Parker, who was the farm director up there, and he moved to Chicago before I did and worked for Aubrey, Finlay, Marley and Hodgson, which was the advertising agency for International Harvester, and then later on in life, he worked for John Deere, and again, in advertising, public relations, and that sort of thing. But he was a very persuasive person, and he just got in very well with Haydn Evans, who was the general manager at WBAY-TV. And Haydn understood the importance of agriculture, and so because of that, Bob was able to get programming and time and money to do what he did. And then, when it made money for the station, then that made it relatively easy, but you

know, we had Ralston Purina, and we had the fertilizer companies and the seed companies and International Harvester and John Deere, and they were all important advertisers up there. And he was able to get the wherewithal to get that done. And it was interesting, when I came to Chicago and talked to Ward Quaal, the president of WGN, he had the same love for agriculture. He said, "We cannot look at WGN as a Chicago-only station, because we're a clear channel, and we have farmers and ranchers out there that depend on us," and so he had the same dedication.

DePue: Do we have enough time to go into detail about how you ended up at WGN?

Samuelson: Yeah, I think I can do that fairly quickly.

DePue: Okay.

Samuelson: It was...1960. The Wisconsin State Fair was on at the time. And when I worked at Green Bay, I listened to WGN a lot, because—

DePue: They were the big footprint in the Midwest.

Samuelson: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Now, WLS was bigger because they were the prairie farmers' station, and they were bigger, but WGN just—and I guess part of it was because of the Mutual Broadcasting System and my days in Appleton—but when I'm out driving around, I'd listen to WGN. So the farm director, Norm Kraft, on a Friday in August, resigned on the air and walked out to become a member of the campaign staff of Senator John Kennedy for the presidency, with the thought that if John Kennedy was elected, he'd be the secretary of agriculture. Well, he did not leave Ward Quaal very happy; as a matter of fact, Ward was angry, because the show—agriculture was important.

DePue: And Ward Quaal's position was...?

Samuelson: President of WGN. So I get a call when I'm driving back to Green Bay from the Wisconsin State Fair from Bob Parker, who had been my boss in Green Bay, saying, "Did you hear that Norm Kraft resigned today?" and I said, "No." And he said, "Well," he said, "he did, and I just want you to know that they're in a hurry to get somebody, and I talked to Ward Quaal, and I put your name in the ring." And I said, "I'm not ready for this." "Well," he said, "I think you are," and he said, "Lane Beattie at the Department of Agriculture in Washington has also called Ward and put your name on the list." Well, then I didn't hear anything for ten days, but the general manager of WBAY called me in on Monday morning, and he said, "Orion, we've been thinking about this, and if you're worth a thousand dollars a month to us a year from now, you're worth it right now," so he said, "I'm raising your salary now." He doesn't know that I know, (laughter) but Bob had called him right away to say, "Look," he said, "Orion's name is in the ring, and I didn't put it there initially; Lane

Beattie put it there initially." So he wanted to take himself off the hook with his boss, who was still a good friend.

So ten days went by and nothing happened, and then I get a phone call from Bruce Dennis, who was program manager at WGN saying, "We'd like to talk to you." So I said to my wife, I said, "This isn't going to happen." I said, "We've just built this new house, and you know, but they want to fly me down to Chicago, so it's a free trip to Chicago." But I said, "I just know that people in that market are nasty; if you make a mistake, there are ten other people to take your place." So I came down, spent the day. Everybody I met— from Wally Phillips to Ward Quaal to Bruce Dennis to everybody— couldn't be nicer. And so at the end of the day, Ward said, "We'd like to hire you." Suddenly, a day trip to Chicago has become a life-changing event. I said, "Well, I've got to go back and talk to my wife."

So I went back to Green Bay, and we talked, and I said, "Oh, man, I just can't make up my mind. I just don't know." So at the end of the deadline, I called Bruce, and I said, "Bruce, I just don't know." He said, "Tell you what. You and your wife come to Chicago as our guests for the weekend and take a look at housing and all that sort of thing." And we did. And came back to Green Bay, and I finally, the next day, said, "This is dumb. Put WGN call letters on my resume, and I can go to any station in the country. So yeah, let's do it for five years, get out of here, come back to Wisconsin, (laughter) buy a station, spend the rest of my life at a small station."

And so we took the job, and then that's when I had the conversation. I came back down, and so Ward and I are talking. And he said, "Orion, what do you think you need to have to make the move?" I said, "I have no idea." "Well," he said, "give me a number, and if you're high, I'll tell you, and if you're low, I'll tell you." He was that kind of a person, that you'd believe in him and trusted him. So I said, "Well, how about fourteen thousand a year?" He later told me that he almost broke out in laughter.

DePue: You probably said that with some trepidation, huh?

Samuelson: Oh, I did. I did. That was a four-thousand-dollar raise in about a month. And he said, "Well," he said, "I think we can do that," but he said, "we'll review in six months, and then we'll go from there." I said, "What about a contract?" "Well," he said, "I'm from Ishpeming and you're from the Kickapoo Valley." He said, "I'll bet a handshake works there." And I said, "It does." So we shook hands, and twenty-four years later, the attorneys in the Tribune Tower (laughter) discovered I didn't have a contract, so the rest is history.

DePue: And with that, we probably need a break.

Samuelson: Okay.

(End of interview #1)

Interview with Orion Samuelson

Interview #2: February 2, 2009
Interviewer Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: We're here for our third session with Orion Samuelson, and Orion, we've gotten you to the point where you finally have landed, enticed, to the big city.

Samuelson: Where I thought I'd spend five years and get out of here and go back to Wisconsin and buy a radio station in a small town, and spend the rest of my life there.

DePue: Now, it seems to me that there was a point in this discussion where you were saying Appleton was a big city. So what was your reaction now, grappling with the notion you're going to be living in Chicago?

Samuelson: When I moved down here, I came down in a 1948 Chrysler New Yorker. I was in a big, stylish automobile. And that was before expressways in Chicago, and I get onto some of these city streets—and this is 1960, so this '48 Chrysler is twelve years old, and the brakes aren't that solid, and I suddenly found I'm using brakes more than anything else because of the traffic. And it was a major adjustment, from a lifestyle standpoint, but it became fun very, very soon. Now, I was getting up at 4:00 in the morning because I would have to be on the air at five o'clock, and then I've done that all of my time here. I've been up—I now get up at quarter to three in

the morning. And it didn't take long to find out that this was an exciting career and an exciting job, because when Ward Quaal hired me, he said, "I've hired you, Orion, to give me the best agricultural radio program in the country." And he said, "If that means you have to be in Dallas tomorrow and Washington, D.C. the next day, and Denver the next day," he said, "you go. You don't come and ask me. I'm hiring you to make those decisions." And he said, "The other thing I want you to know is that WGN does everything first class—that we are *the* station in the United States; we do everything first class." That included flying, and so I was enjoying a very exciting life, doing a lot of traveling, and going to interesting events and places. And wherever I would go, the WGN call letters would be recognized with respect and with excitement. And so it didn't take long to say, "Hey, this is fun, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it."

An interesting sidebar: my parents—I finally got them down here in 1961, a year after I'd been here. They were still farming, so it was pretty tough for them to leave the farm, but I convinced them they ought to come down. My dad lived to be ninety-five, and my mother lived to be eighty-nine, and in all those years, they came down five times. They were never comfortable. Dad would walk in, and he'd say, "We've been here; let's go home." He could never, ever get accustomed to it. I could not explain to him what I did for a living because he wouldn't understand. He wouldn't understand my doing a program at 5:00, flying to Washington and interviewing people, then being back in time for dinner—it was just beyond his comprehension. But the thing he did for me was he gave me the best job description I will ever get. My dad didn't have much of a sense of humor. He was quiet, didn't talk very much. So on that first trip in '61, I brought he and my mother down to WGN and had them sit in the studio for the full hour—we were doing the noon show on radio. I used all the big words I'd ever learned and talked all the radio talk I could with my producer and engineer to impress him. And when we got done, he didn't say anything. So we walked back to the office, and he didn't say anything. So I said, "Dad, what do you think?" And serious as a heart attack, he said, "You know, it must be nice to be able to look at all that hard work and then just talk about it." (laughter) The best job description I will ever get—

DePue: Put you in your place.

Samuelson: —because that's what I do. That's what I do. As I said, I don't like to do the hard work; I like to watch it.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the broadcaster's voice that you're so well-known for. When did that happen for you?

Samuelson: I guess it started to change probably when I got back on my feet in my junior year of high school, it began to change, and by the time I graduated, it had reached a good quality, and then over the years, it just sort of matures, and you learn how to use it a little bit more. It's not something I

trained, and as I said so often, I don't hear myself the way other people hear me. I really don't hear anything different or special about my voice—but thank God other people do, because—

DePue: When did you become aware that other people recognized that quality?

Samuelson: Oh, I would say in Green Bay, where people would start mentioning it, and then, you know, the farm people would mention it—those who were my main audience. But then here in Chicago, I have to be careful about the volume of my voice. If I'm at a restaurant, somebody will come up and say, "Hey, I know that voice. I listen to you." Well, it's flattering, but then I think, "Golly, do I talk too loud, or what?" But I was at the Cattleman's Convention just a few days ago, and two or three of them said, "Boy, can't miss that voice." Well, thank you. I'm glad.

DePue: So it's the voice more than the face that people recognize in your case?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Although, since doing the television show, more of them do recognize the face, but it's the voice first. It really is. And as I say, I don't see anything different, (laughs) but I'm glad other people do.

DePue: Did you give up your singing career?

Samuelson: Oh, yes. Well, with one exception. When Bob Collins was the morning man here, somebody at a Farm Bureau convention knew that I had won a contest in Wisconsin as a young person, doing Yogi Yorgesson. So we always did our radio shows on the road with a band, and we had Leno Frigo and the Musical Wheels, and somebody at the broadcast, after we had ended the air part of it, and we were doing a music show, somebody said, "Hey, you've got to sing this." "No, I'm not going to sing this." Well, I did, finally, and of course they recorded it back here at the studios, and then the next thing, Uncle Bobby is playing it on the air. And then we're starting to get calls saying, "Gee, where can I get a copy of that?" So we talked about it, and we worked with a band, and we went into a studio, and we recorded "I Yust Go Nuts at Christmas" on one side, and the flip side—of this 45 rpm record—was "Yingle Bells." (laughter) And Bob and I paid for the band and the recording and all that, and Paul Gallos, a record promoter par excellence—back in the days when we had record promoters—he said, "I'll get it duplicated, and I'll market it for you." So we made the agreement that for every record we sold, we'd give a dollar to the Salvation Army. And so we did 12,000 records.

DePue: That's a lot.

Samuelson: (laughs) I was surprised. I said, "It doesn't say much for the musical taste of our listeners." But because it did help the Salvation Army—it amazed me that we sold that many. But that was my one foray into singing.

DePue: Well, a change of subject here entirely—where did you end up living when you moved to Chicago?

Samuelson: Renting a place in Evanston for six months, because that was the thing to do. You didn't really know, you know, where the places to live were and what they looked like and everything. So we rented six months and joined Trinity Lutheran Church in Evanston—to which I still belong—and then bought a house, that cost twice as much as the new house I built in Green Bay, in Glennview, and then I've lived in various places ever since, and finally, three years ago, decided to move back to the country and moved back to Huntley, Illinois, which is halfway between Rockford and Chicago, so that's a fifty-two-mile commute down to the tower every day. But at 3:30 in the morning, it's the eighteen-wheelers and me, and we get along just fine. In the afternoon, at three o'clock, four-wheelers are out there—not so good.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the market that WGN—in terms of the geographic scope that they reach.

Samuelson: Daytime, we basically look at seven states. We look at Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, a little bit of Missouri and Minnesota. Nighttime—with the skywave signal at night, we can get into twenty-five, twenty-eight states. And when I came here in 1960, we were one of twenty-five clear channel radio stations in the country, which meant that there was no other station on 720—we were the only one there. Then the Congress started to break down the clear channels, saying, "No, we need more radio stations. We don't need these twenty-five." Ward Quaal, who was a real advocate of the clear channel, said, "Yes, we do, because we are the only information service for people in North Dakota and people in Idaho at night, when their local stations were off the air and we were there as a clear channel. But that all changed.

As a matter of fact, the first one to come on our frequency was Fidel Castro, back during the missile crisis in '62. During that time, when we were blockading the Russian ships from bringing missiles into Cuba—a very tense time—John Kennedy, the president, asked four radio stations in the U.S. to carry him addressing the Cuban people in their language in a five-minute address every hour on the hour from midnight to 5:00 a.m. for four nights, and WGN was one of the stations he selected. We had a strong signal into Cuba. So for I guess five nights, from midnight to 5:00, every hour, we'd carry this five-minute message, where the president said, "It's not you we're against; it's your leadership, and we can't allow these missiles to come into your country." Within six months, Fidel Castro had a 200,000-watt station on all four frequencies of the stations that had carried it. And at night, with that skywave, if you lived on the south side of Chicago, you couldn't get WGN; you got Cuba. Because, you know, the limitation in this country is 50,000 watts. That's the maximum power you can have on a radio station. Well, he put a 200,000-watter on all four. It took until 1973, working through the Swiss embassy, to get that changed. Now he's ten cycles or so off our frequency, and so it helps it. But he was the first to start breaking down the radio station.

DePue: How did your market differ from WLS, who was your other big competitor, it sounds like?

Samuelson: Timing is everything. In April of 1960, they signed off as the Prairie Farmer station on the night of April thirtieth, and the next day signed on as Wonderful Rock and Roll WLS, and they became the first rock and roll station in Chicago. And overnight, they fired all of the musicians. You know, they had the barn dance, and they had a band on the morning show, and the people who were doing agriculture—they dropped them all. They were no longer the Prairie Farmer station. Just infuriated farmers across the country. So my timing was good, because it was in August of 1960. And when that happened, Ward Quaal, who had been doing a farm program here at WGN said, "Hey, now we're alone, so we're going to step up and really start doing it." And so they increased the broadcast here for an hour at noon and that sort of thing, and then I came on board in September of 1960.

DePue: And I would guess—and you can speak volumes to this question—but I would guess that there are few audiences that are more loyal than those farmers.

Samuelson: I don't know of any audience that's more loyal unless it's a Super Bowl–winning football team, they're probably going to be more loyal to the broadcast, but day in and day out—because farmers depend on what we do. And when I came to Chicago, I felt my primary responsibility was to communicate to producers weather, markets, and whatever else they needed to make their daily decisions. But over the years, I now feel that equally important is that I help the non-farm consumer in our audience—and that's the biggest part of our audience—understand what it takes to put food on their table. And so I have gone beyond being strictly a reporter. I've become an advocate for the people who produce livestock and crops and everything. And it's important, because I hear from producers over and over again, "Thank God you're here doing what you do," and city people say, "You know, without you, we wouldn't know why food prices are where they are, or we wouldn't know where the next county fair is going to be held," and all that sort of thing. So I see it now as almost an equal responsibility—talking to farmers, talking for farmers.

DePue: When you first got here, was it strictly radio or both radio and TV?

Samuelson: It was radio when I arrived, but within two years, Ward said, "We should be doing television on Channel Nine. We should be doing agriculture on that." So we started doing specials—an hour special, a two-hour special—that would take a lot of production work and traveling with the camera crew to various parts of the country to get it, and then in '63, we started a daily show called *Top of the Morning* that ran from 6:30 to 7:00 in the morning, and that program went until we moved the radio station back down to the tower in 1986, and that's when *Top of the Morning* ended. So

it had about a—well, from ’64 to ’86, we did five days a week, half an hour—and had a good audience.

DePue: What was your schedule, then, on the radio in those early years?

Samuelson: Early years, we’d do radio from 5:00 to 5:30, and it was a show called *Milking Time*.

DePue: Farm news?

Samuelson: Farm news. Markets, weather, interview guests. And then we would do—when I came here, it was *Country Fair*, and it was 12:00 to 1:00. Live band in the studio every day. And we started with Eddie Mum and the Country Fair Boys, and over the years, we had Captain Stubby and the Buccaneers, and Dolph Hewitt and the Sage Riders, and Leno Frigo and the Musical Wheels. Today, we have a band called Roundhouse; we still do a little bit of on-the-road remote broadcast. But in those days, we had a live band every day, and on the one day a week that we’d have to give the five-piece band, Eddie Mum and the Country Fair Boys, the day off, we had the Bob Crandler Bozo Circus Band—sixteen pieces—doing the farm show.

DePue: That sounds like a big expense, so there must have been money that this farm show was generating.

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. For the amount of time we had on the air, it generated it. There were years where we would generate four million dollars of advertising revenue, and the—

DePue: Was that some of the most lucrative time that the radio station had?

Samuelson: Well, from the standpoint of the rate. The only rate on the rate card that was higher was *Ragtime in the Morning*, and then we were the second-highest advertising rate—the farm show at noon and the farm show in the morning—and then it got to the point where the market reports would have what we’d call adjacencies, and so farm advertisers would buy the minute next to the market reports throughout the day. It was very lucrative. That has changed; we don’t generate that kind of money today because there are so many other avenues of advertising available to farm sponsors. And as the number of farmers declined, they say, “Well, gee, we can almost visit each one personally—cheaper than advertising.” But we still maintain a good source of revenue, and the service, while we no longer do the hour at noon—that ended three years ago—we still do eighteen reports a day, and then we do an hour from 5:00 to 6:00 Saturday morning and an hour from noon until 1:00 Saturdays. So.

DePue: What I’d like to have you do next, Orion, is I’m going to say thumbnail, but inasmuch as you’d like to discuss what agriculture was like in the United States in those early years at WGN, and especially if you can contrast that with even what it was twenty years before, when you were growing up on the farm in Wisconsin.

Samuelson: Twenty years before, listening to WLS, the Prairie Farmer station, we listened as much for the entertainment, because it was the home of all of these barn dance people, and the *National Barn Dance* on Saturday night, from the Eighth Street Theatre, which is now where the ballroom of the Conrad Hilton Hotel stands. That was a regular; that was a must. We listened all the time on Saturday night to that program. And then at noon, Art Page with the *Dinner Bell Hour*, and that would be market reports from the Union Stockyards. But again, it would be musical entertainment as well, because they had five or six bands that were full staff on the radio station.

People today ask me, "What is the biggest change you have seen in agriculture in the years that you've been covering it," and I have a one-word answer—it may not be the right answer for a lot of people—but globalization to me is the biggest change I've seen. And let me clarify that. In 1960, our hour-long noon show, if we did a weather forecast, it was for Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan. If we did markets, we would go to the Union Stockyards, and we would do markets from there—livestock. And then in those days, Board of Trade, if we got a three-cent move on a soybean price, that was a huge day. Today, a sixty-cent move is not uncommon. And from the standpoint of news and information, it would basically be interviews that we would do with the president of the Farm Bureau or people doing the Farm Progress Show or things of that type.

Today, we spend as much time doing South American and Australian weather as we do U.S. weather, because in the wintertime, weather isn't that critical here, but right now, we're looking at a drought in Argentina, and it affects our soybean and corn price at the Board of Trade every day. We look at—have a good wheat crop in Australia. It affects the wheat price at the Board of Trade every day. We take a look at the market for American beef in Japan and South Korea; we spend a fair amount of time on that. We look at the European Union and some of its bans on technology. And what happens outside the borders of the United States probably has more impact on farm prices than what happens inside the border. And you know, one of the prime examples of that was the discovery of the case of mad cow disease in Alberta, Canada at the beginning of the century. The next day, our cattle prices were a little bit down, and it just had a tremendous impact on our prices. And so the program content of today is really almost 180 degrees from what it was in 1960 when I arrived here, because agriculture has changed that much, and as I keep saying to our farm listeners, the challenge you have is, so much that it affects your price, you have no control over it, because it happens outside the borders of the United States.

DePue: But in 1960, you wouldn't describe it as a global market at that time?

Samuelson: No, no. Some of the hallmark dates I look at in American agriculture—a Saturday in July of 1972, when I walked into this office, as a matter of

fact—and no computers, at that time. Our news came on Associated Press and United Press International teletypes. And there was a bell that would ring when there was a bulletin; we called it the bulletin bell. And I vividly remember coming in and getting ready for that Saturday noon show, and the bulletin bell is ringing, and I walk over, and I look at the wire, and it's typing out, "Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz today announced a major sale of wheat to the Soviet Union"—the Soviet Union was still alive at that time. And to me, that led to planting fencerow-to-fencerow, and to me, that one announcement put American agriculture into the global market in a way that it had never seen before and probably never imagined. And with the Soviet Union buying a sizeable amount of wheat, some of the other countries, like India and Japan and other countries, that were buying our wheat, but not a lot of it, suddenly said, "Oh my golly, if they buy all of the wheat, then what do we...? We better start buying as well."

And it just led to the marketplace exploding, to the point where in '74, Richard Nixon was president, and prices were escalating, and he declared a price freeze—a wage price freeze. And he also declared an embargo on selling soybeans overseas, which infuriated Japan, because there, soybean oil is a prime ingredient in the human diet. And so now, all of a sudden, we can't get American soybeans; what are we going to do? And that move by President Nixon sent Japan to Brazil. They started looking—okay, where else in the world do you find the climate and the soil that'll do what we could do in this country. And they found Brazil. They put millions of yen into a soybean industry in Brazil. Up until that point, we had no competition in the world soybean market. Today, they produce more than we do. So these factors that are totally out of control of the American producer, we have to talk about, and we have to talk about a great deal. And it was '72 that put us into the global market, and then '74, some of it was taken away when they started to compete with us.

DePue: I'm going to jump way back into the late 1950s, and let me preface this by just saying, my understanding as a poor student of American agriculture history is what's always plagued American agriculture is that we're just too darn good. Our farmers are so productive that overproduction has always been the Achilles heel, if you will. Could you discuss the implications of that, perhaps?

Samuelson: Yeah, that has been the dilemma, and we have exercised different ideas and different programs on how to overcome that problem. And in the fifties, when Ezra Taft Benson was secretary of agriculture—Dwight Eisenhower was president—the Soil Bank came to life. Soil Bank was a place where you would put farm acres and get paid for placing those farm acres out of production into this Soil Bank. You'd have to plant grass or something on them to keep them from eroding.

DePue: Was that 1958? That's the date I saw, at least.

Samuelson: Yeah, I guess it would. I know it was the second term of Dwight Eisenhower, and farm prices were historically low, and so Congress and the administration said, this is how we'll fix it, and so we had the Soil Bank. I suppose it helped a little bit, but what it did, it encouraged (laughs) investors and city people to buy farm land, and as they say, put it in the Soil Bank and let the government pay for it. And that was one of the weaknesses and fallacies of that kind of a program.

DePue: Well, I would guess that being a good farmer, you say, "Okay, which of my acres do I put into the Soil Bank," and which acres did they put there?

Samuelson: The least productive acres, and so the productive acres would stay in production, and it did not cut overall production as much as they had hoped, but it did cut production. And then over the years, we've gone through various programs to do that. We've had the PIK Program, and we've had Conservation Reserve Program, which takes fragile acres out of production, and farmers get paid for that. But I would say it was the Farm Bill of '96 where we began to change how government farm programs worked. Because there was a time when if you were going to get a subsidy, you had to grow corn, you had to grow wheat, you had to grow other specified crops in order to participate in the subsidy program. And you had to grow those crops whether there was a market or not. And with the '96 bill, we started looking at maybe letting farmers produce what the market demands, and then government won't end up buying a lot of surplus stock, farmers will achieve what the majority of them want—to get paid fairly by the marketplace, not by government checks. So that sort of signaled the beginning of a change in government farm policy. And we still have government subsidy programs, but they don't take nearly the amount of money, and when the market delivers a profit for farmers, then the government really doesn't have to deliver it.

To me, the other hallmark in agriculture that changed things was in the 2006 State of the Union address, when Governor Bush used the word "ethanol" in the State of the Union address.

DePue: You mean President Bush.

Samuelson: President Bush, yeah. And the next day, you've got Warren Buffett, and you've got Bill Gates and everybody else saying, what is this? We had been working for thirty years to get ethanol into the program. It started out as gasohol and then became ethanol. And we couldn't get anywhere. We had the oil embargo and scared everybody to death, and then when that went away, we forgot about it and kept importing oil. And agriculture had been saying, "Hey, we have a renewable resource out here that can revitalize rural America and produce energy by Americans on American farms." And it finally came to life after that State of the Union address and then led to record-high prices for a lot of our crops and livestock. And then the economy hit, and now we've got ethanol plants that are in trouble.

DePue: Since I've got an expert on agricultural policy here, I want to ask you describe what parity is and how the layman can understand parity.

Samuelson: Parity, basically, I would describe—and I'm not an economist, and I'm not a farm policy expert—but parity would be fair price, is basically what it is. And so we had standards set decades ago saying, Okay, this is a parity price for corn; this—

DePue: This dates all the way back to the thirties, does it not?

Samuelson: Yeah, it does. Yeah, that's, I think, when the word first came into farm policy. Yeah. And then we would update what parity should be—that would take into account the costs to produce a bushel of wheat, and then what parity would say would be a fair price to pay the cost and allow a little profit. And so we set this standard, this guideline, that we call parity. So every year at the end of the year, we'd say, Okay, well this is parity, but look at this. The corn price is fifty cents a bushel below that. So that formula would then be used by those in Congress who wrote farm policy. And say, Okay, if it's this much below parity, then we have to write a check to the farmer to bring it up to parity. And I guess that's the best way I can describe it. I would say what was determined to be a fair price would be a parity price.

DePue: Okay. Would it be fair to say you quickly became the voice of agriculture in the Midwest, or one of the—

Samuelson: One of the voices. Yeah, one of the voices. Right.

DePue: How did you feel about your role in that position and then talking about very important issues for farmers, and trying to remain some—keep some—I'm doing a poor job asking this question—journalistic integrity in the process of—

Samuelson: I know where you're going. Yeah.

DePue: —talking about whether or not we want more government involvement or less government involvement and things like that?

Samuelson: I still work very hard to keep news stories objective. My personal opinion bias and prejudice, I express in the feature called *Samuelson Sez*. And I work very hard to keep my personal prejudices out of news stories when I'm reporting them. I basically let my interview guests do that, if we're working on a story. For example, I just did a long interview with Charlie Stenholm—Texas congressman for twenty-six years, member of the House ag committee who was no longer in Congress—but did an interview with him on a subject that I feel strongly about, which is the unwanted horse problem we have in this country now, because we can no longer slaughter horses for processing for meat for export—because there are people in other countries of the world who eat horse meat.

So when horses in this country were unwanted or for whatever reason, they would sell those horses to a plant in Rochelle, Illinois, or two

plants in Texas. They would be slaughtered under USDA guidelines, and then the meat would be shipped overseas. Well, PETA and the Humane Society of the United States says, oh my golly, you can't do that. You can't kill horses for food. And so the three plants have been closed, and so now horses that people can't afford to feed, or they don't want them anymore, or whatever, they turn them loose. And we have about 70,000 of these unwanted horses in this country, starving to death. And I've done an editorial or two saying, "This is wrong. PETA, you are condemning horses to a much worse death then a humane death in a slaughtering plant, and if people in France want to eat horse meat, then we should be able to supply them." And I've done the editorials.

Well, my five-minute interview with Charlie Stenholm, he really came out strong saying, "We've got to change this. We've got to change this, because you're condemning horses to a terrible death, and the law is wrong." So I let him do the editorializing. I asked the questions. And yeah, I have a strong prejudice on this, so I'm sure I asked the questions in a way that would get the response that would share what I feel, but in Charlie's case, he feels even more strongly than I do about it.

DePue: Well, taking you back to the 1960s, one of the big issues that's always been there that we've already discussed is the amount of federal involvement in agriculture. I believe it was Charles Shuman who was a strong advocate to keep government out as much as possible.

Samuelson: Absolutely. Charlie—

DePue: And he was from the Farm Bureau.

Samuelson: American Farm Bureau Federation. He was the longtime president. He was from Sullivan, Illinois, and was the longtime president, and he was absolutely staunch in that stand. He would not change. Keep government out of agriculture, and let us do what we do, and we'll handle our market.

DePue: Put you on the spot. In the sixties, where were your personal thoughts on that issue?

Samuelson: I tended to agree with Charlie, I really did. And watching Congress do what it does, I don't think they know how to run agriculture. I don't think they know how to run the banking business. And I would leave that to people who are in the industry, and in agriculture, particularly. I just think farmers have a lot of common sense. I agreed with Charlie.

DePue: But the Farmers Union—correct me when I'm wrong here—but the Farmers Union, another lo—

Samuelson: National Farmers Union.

DePue: —lobby organization, would say, if you do that, then we get to this gross overproduction, and we drive lots of farmers out.

Samuelson: Yeah, absolutely. So the National Farmers Union is looked upon as a more Democratic-oriented organization, Farm Bureau—

DePue: Democratic with a big *D*?

Samuelson: With a big *D*. And Farm Bureau, Republican. And they've had that sort of separation over the years. And then we've added, you know, the National Farmers Organization, and the American Agriculture Movement that drove tractors to D.C., and the NFO that slaughtered hogs and dumped milk to bring prices up and to gain national attention. I did not agree with any of those policies. It just build a terrible image for agriculture. And when you have hungry people and you see farmers dumping milk and killing pigs, to the city people, that's very wrong, and in the long run, it hurts the image and understanding of agriculture, and I just... I'm more conservative than liberal.

DePue: Well, again, to put you on the spot here a little bit, so you accept the reality that the small producers, the inefficient producers, are going to be driven out if you get government out of the business of farming a little bit more?

Samuelson: It will happen, just as it happens in the automobile dealers and in the ma-and-pa corner grocery stores and the ma-and-pa corner drug stores. We pay them lip service, but when a big Walgreens opens up a block down the street, that's where we go. And in agriculture, it's a tough job, and it is more management-oriented today than production-oriented, really. You've got to be able to market and manage. And people say, "Well, the family farm is dying." No, the family farm isn't dying, but it's changing a lot. The family farm that I grew up on—200 acres that enabled my sister and my mother and dad and me to live with adequate food and clothes and everything—that was sold to a neighbor in '64 who has since purchased two more farms adjoining. And we were milking thirty cows; they're milking 180 cows. It's supporting two families. But it's still a family farm.

And that is the change that has happened over the years. Some people say big is bad, but with the cost of inputs and machinery and everything else, in order to get return on that cost, you've got to have more land to operate. I'm not getting into the moral argument, if this is good or bad, but from the standpoint of the economic reality, that 200-acre farm that my mom and dad had, it wouldn't support a family today.

DePue: I want to take kind of a decade-by-decade approach in this one question, in terms of—and we'll focus right now on the 1960s. What were the big changes you were seeing happening in agriculture in that decade?

Samuelson: The sixties were about as quiet a decade as I've seen. We were still living with the Soil Bank. We'd have our weather challenges, but—

DePue: Mechanization had already occurred?

Samuelson: Mechanization had already occurred—not to the extent that we're looking at today with the size of the combines and the planters and all that—but horses were pretty much gone from the agricultural scene. So the sixties

were quiet. Then we came to the seventies and that sale of wheat to the Soviet Union.

DePue: Okay, well let me—I don't want you to get too far into this, because again, we'll get into this later. How about the hybridization of—

Samuelson: That had happened.

DePue: That had? Forties and the thirties already?

Samuelson: Well, Henry Wallace, you know, who was secretary of agriculture and vice president under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he was the pioneer in hybridization, and so we suddenly went from thirty bushels of corn to the acre to sixty, and then have increased to where we are today—over 200. But that was the beginning, and that had occurred. Tractors had replaced horses. And so from the standpoint of life on the farm, most of the farms were electrified by that time, and so it was a fairly quiet time in the sixties. I don't remember any major news issues that we had to deal with.

DePue: I've been doing a little bit of homework and looking at what agricultural historians have put down for dates, and one of them kind of surprised me, and I want to get your reaction to 1967, ADM builds a soybean oil refinery hydrogenation plant in Decatur. And it surprised me because—was that something that was fairly new at that time?

Samuelson: Well, we were processing soybeans. When you process a soybean, you get meal as a livestock feed, and you get oil that at that time primarily was an ingredient in paint and industrial uses, but this hydrogenated plant now made it a cooking oil, and that's what opened up that Japanese market, for example, to U.S. soybean oil.

DePue: How did that change come about? Was that part of what the University of Illinois and that Extension process was working on?

Samuelson: I would guess researchers at the University of Illinois did, but ADM was an innovative company, and they would put a lot of money into research. And I'm going to have to continue this later because I've got to go up front.

DePue: Okay.

Samuelson: Okay.

(Pause in recording)

DePue: Good afternoon, Orion.

Samuelson: And good afternoon to you. Good to be back.

DePue: Today is still the second of February, and this is our fourth session with you, and we're going to conclude this one and pick it up tomorrow, and we're going to take a more thematic approach to issues tomorrow. What I wanted to spend this last session today with you about is to talk about your career as a broadcaster and hitting that farm market and how that career

has evolved over time. So let's start with that question. From the early 1960s when—you know, farming was quite different. There were a lot more farmers out there, a lot different kind of farms. How has your personal show and the show here at WGN evolved?

Samuelson: Well, it has diminished from a time standpoint. We no longer do as much time in agricultural programming at WGN as we did in 1960 because then, on a daily basis, we'd do half an hour in the morning at 5:00 a.m., we'd do an hour at noon, from 12:00 to 1:00, and then on Saturday, we would do an hour-long noon program and an hour-long morning program—plus the market reports that we'd do throughout the day, because in agriculture, markets change rapidly.

And when I arrived here in 1960, a three-cent move in corn prices in a day would be unusual; today, it could be—well, like today, a nineteen-cent change in the price of corn. So the markets have become far more volatile. And in the last eighteen months, 2008 and the early part of 2009, the markets have been unlike any I've seen in my years of covering it, because in 2008, we had record-high prices for wheat, corn, soybeans, soybean oil, soybean meal, cattle, hogs, milk, crude oil, copper, tin, aluminum, and on and on. Record-high prices—prices we could never dream of. We saw wheat above twenty dollars a bushel in the early summer of 2008, and we saw corn on the futures market nearing eight dollars a bushel and soybeans, fifteen, sixteen dollars. And of course, oil up to nearly a hundred and fifty dollars a barrel. And we saw all of that happen—prices that any farmer I talked to said they could never, ever have imagined seeing in their lifetime.

And then, in the three months or so starting in late July, we saw the biggest, fastest drop in prices, when wheat prices dropped down to seven dollars a bushel and when soybeans dropped down to nine dollars and corn dropped below three dollars in a relatively short period of time. But because of that, and with that, oil went from a 147 dollars down to the low thirties per barrel at one time. People just couldn't imagine that happening when they were up at 147 dollars. And so the change in volatility and the impact on countries outside the border of the United States is just a huge contributor to the volatility.

And something else we have to remember from the standpoint of agriculture—every once a while, a listener will write and say, "You know, if we stopped exporting the agricultural products to other countries, our food would cost a lot less." And my response to that is, "How much less can food cost?" because Americans now spend a smaller percentage of take-home pay for food than any other country in the world. But there are those who think that if we were to do away with exports, it would benefit us here. And my response, after I say, "How much cheaper?"—"You tell me which half of the farmers you want to stop farming today," because if we didn't have an export market, anywhere from 40 to 50 percent of our farmers would have no market for what they do.

DePue: Those people also say, then, that we don't need to import any oil or any foreign products as well?

Samuelson: (laughs) Haven't heard that yet, no. (laughter) Haven't heard that yet. But it just—the last eighteen months, while they've been record-setting, proves to me what I've been saying for half a century: prices never go the same way forever. There is always a price correction. And one of the problems we have, I think, as human beings, is we get into mindsets. When times are good, we think they'll always be good. When times are bad, which they are now, we think they'll always be bad. But here comes that word "change."

DePue: Well, we'll talk a lot more about this kind of stuff tomorrow, but I thought this would be an appropriate time to quote you quoting Earl Butz, and you'll probably recognize this quote from *Samuelson Sez*: "What goes up will come down; what comes down will go up."—and here's the curious part of this quote—"The cure for high prices is higher prices; the cure for low prices is lower prices." Reflect on that?

Samuelson: It's a great saying, because what he is saying is when prices get too high, people cut their consumption, and so that brings the price down, and when prices get too low, people buy more than they probably would, and that way, prices start to recover. And that was the basis for what Earl said. And while I like all of the secretaries of agriculture I've worked with, he would be at the top of my list because he was such a great communicator for agriculture. But he's absolutely right. The cure for high prices is higher prices, and the cure for low prices is lower prices.

DePue: And you mentioned Earl Butz, and you've already mentioned—the timeframe that he was the secretary of agriculture coincides with 1972, and—

Samuelson: And President Nixon.

DePue: —from what I gather, that was a very significant change in American agriculture.

Samuelson: It really was, yeah, because he was secretary of agriculture for Richard Nixon, and two important things happened during that time that has affected American agriculture. Number one was the major sale of wheat to the Soviet Union, and number two was opening the China market, because it was President Nixon who made the first presidential visit to communist China. And today, that country is our biggest buyer of soybeans and a major buyer of other agricultural products. So that period, along with the price freeze (laughs) that also brought us the competition of South American soybean production, really three very significant things that happened agriculturally in that early 1970 period.

DePue: It reminds us of just how central agriculture is to the story of American history in general. It certainly was true 150 years ago, but people think, "Well, there's only a very tiny percentage of Americans today that are

engaged in agriculture, so it doesn't have that big an impact," but boy, did this last year prove that wrong, huh?

Samuelson: Definitely proved it wrong. You know, we talk about minorities on this planet, and I say, "To me, the most important minority is the 2 percent of our population who produce the food that we enjoy and millions of people around the world enjoy." Less than 2 percent of our population that actively farm and ranch today, and look at what they do. I think somebody recently said that one American producer now produces enough to feed 135 people. There was a time they produced enough to feed themselves. (laughs)

DePue: So if 2 percent, 135 people, then you quickly realize what you have just mentioned, the importance of that overseas market.

Samuelson: Oh, it's critical to us. It really is.

DePue: Let's go back then to your career. When you first got there, you're impacting a much larger farm population, so how did that decrease over time in terms of the amount of message that you were tailoring specifically to those producers?

Samuelson: From the standpoint of the message, the message is as much as we were doing then, it's just a different content.

DePue: Well, I'm also talking about how the show has evolved, in terms of time, time slots, and things like that.

Samuelson: The show, as I mentioned, has diminished from a time standpoint. We no longer do that hour-long show at noon. We do more reports a day than we did, because of the volatility of the markets and how rapidly they can change during a trading session. The other thing we have done is at one time, programmers looked at, "Well, here's the farm stuff. We'll put that over here," and then they would say, "and now Wall Street belongs here." Well, finally convinced programmers here at WGN that these markets are interrelated, so instead of doing Wall Street in this segment and doing Board of Trade and Mercantile Exchange here, let's do them together, because they are related. And the price of oil, particularly, will relate to the price of corn and soybean oil that goes into the alternative fuels program—the ethanol and the biodiesel. So we have combined Wall Street with the Board of Trade and the Mercantile Exchange.

DePue: When did that happen?

Samuelson: That probably happened about five or six years ago.

DePue: Not that long ago, then.

Samuelson: Yeah, not that long ago, no, when we were doing them separately. And now we've put them together, because it is one business community, really.

DePue: How about the TV show?

Samuelson: TV show is a combination of feature stories and current news. It's a weekly production. And we put in the latest news. We do a fair amount of time on weather because you don't get many agricultural meteorologists today, and we have an ag meteorologist who does three different forecasts on our one-hour TV show. He does regional forecast and then an overall national forecast for the week ahead. And farmers tell us that the forecast that we do is the best forecast they get for crop production from anywhere, because he basically is not saying, "You're going to have a great skiing weekend." He'll say, "Hey, you're going to have trouble feeding livestock because the snow is going to make it a problem for you." And so we do more of that.

We go to a lot of the agricultural events and meetings to do interviews that are a part of the show. For example, just back from the Cattlemen's Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, where I talked to the president of the Cattlemen's Association, retiring—he's a rancher from Arizona—and the incoming president, who is a cow-calf farm manager in Michigan. And then we talked to a young couple who have been in farming for twelve years and have done such a good job of environmental stewardship that they won the top national award, which means in twelve years on their South Carolina farm, they have really implemented conservation practices. And that becomes a part of the story that we'll do on the TV show. And then Max and I, since we co-host, we'll talk about our personal experiences, and this is who we saw. On the TV show that we did for thirty years, called *U.S. Farm Report*, every week, devoted a minute to a Country Church Salute. And that probably generated more comment than anything else we did. We'd ask people to send us a picture and a history of their country church, because that church is the center of spiritual and social activity in many rural communities. And the one mistake I made was not keeping the pictures and the history and publishing a book. I could have made a million dollars. (laughs)

DePue: Whose idea was it to do that?

Samuelson: It was mine, because I grew up—and the first church that we saluted in the Country Church Salute was Brush Creek Lutheran Church in Wisconsin, the church I attended, which is a well-photographed church. It's been on the front cover of Sunday paper magazines because of its setting. It sits on a little hill with trees behind it, and in the fall, those maples look like they're on fire, and this is a white country church with a steeple, and so a lot of pictures of that church over the years.

DePue: How have country churches changed over the years?

Samuelson: Well, it's interesting, because I'm active in the church community in Chicago, and I find the inner city churches—Chicago or otherwise—and the country churches are faced with the same challenge. The younger members who come into income-earning status, if they're in an inner-city church, they move to the suburbs; if they're in a rural church, they move

to the city, leaving the older members to try to maintain some magnificent structures in the city or in the country that were built when the membership was much larger than it is today. And so that's a challenge that they have, and you'll find—well, like the church I grew up. Sixty members yet today, and the church is part of a four-point parish, served by one minister. And then you find a church in the inner city of Chicago where they're able to maintain because the younger members who moved to the suburbs still support the home church financially.

DePue: How many members did your church have when you were growing up?

Samuelson: Sixty.

DePue: So it's still the same as far as the number.

Samuelson: Still the same. Yeah, pretty much the same.

DePue: Do those churches have a harder time finding ministers who are willing to go out there?

Samuelson: Especially if you're a four-point parish, because in this case, the distance from the two furthest churches would probably be about thirty-five miles, and so that means the minister in that parish will do two church services this Sunday and then two at the other churches the next Sunday, and on Christmas and Easter will do four services at each of the—you know, they'll get to all of the churches.

DePue: Do they have a layman who's running the service when they're not there?

Samuelson: No, they just don't do it. We had church every other Sunday.

DePue: Even when you were growing up, that was the pattern?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. That was the pattern. Yeah, yeah. And the ability—they still attract members—I mean, pastors—and I'm amazed, because every year, the Luther Theological Seminary in Chicago invites me to speak to student pastors who are thinking of going into a rural church, and those numbers are getting smaller every time I go out there to talk, because most of the students come from a city background.

DePue: Those big suburban churches that are in growth right now.

Samuelson: Yeah, right.

DePue: You mentioned Max—Max Armstrong. When did he join the team?

Samuelson: Thirty-two years ago. He's a farm boy from Southern Indiana, went to Purdue University. Still has a farm in Southern Indiana. His folks passed away in the last two years, and it's being operated by tenant farmers, but he goes down there every once in a while. And he graduated from Purdue. And I first heard Max when he went to work for the Illinois Farm Bureau, doing radio interviews for them. And we'd always get copies, and the first time I told him, I told Lottie, who was my secretary and producer, I said, "If we ever need an associate, I'm going to go after this guy." And he

went through the same trauma I did in deciding whether or not he wanted to leave Bloomington and come to Chicago. I finally had to call his boss, who I'd stayed in touch with all the time anyway, and I said, "I can't convince him to make the move up here," and so Bill said, "I'll talk to him."

DePue: What is the relationship between the two of you? Basically co-equals with different slots of time, or...?

Samuelson: Yeah. Well, we have a rule. When one is gone on assignment, going to conventions—like last week, I was at the Cattlemen's Convention—the other one has to be here to do all of the reports from the first one at 4:50 in the morning until the last one at eleven o'clock at night. So one of us is always here, and that's one of the rules. On the TV show, we are co-hosts, co-producers. And when we're both here in the office on the day of—like today, where we have the eighteen reports—we'll take turns. He may do three or four of them at a time, and then I'll do the others. So it's a cooperative venture. We get along very well, and we come up with program ideas and feature ideas, and we run them by each other, and we get them covered.

DePue: What's the last of the farm or market reports that the two of you do, then, for the day?

Samuelson: For the day, at eleven o'clock at night. The last live one is at 3:30 in the afternoon. By then, all of the markets have closed. Wall Street is closed, and the Board and the Merc are closed, so then we record 4:30, 5:30, 6:30, and the 11:00. So 3:30 will be the last live one that we do.

DePue: Okay. I'd like to move now onto something that you've talked about quite a bit already, and that's the extensive travel, and that surprises me. But I know you're dying to talk about your foreign overseas travel, but I want to start with your domestic travel first, and what's the rationale for going out to Washington, D.C. so much, and some of these other places? It sounds to me like—and I don't want to put words in your mouth—but it starts with doing interviews, but has that evolved over time so that there are other rationales as well for doing this?

Samuelson: Interview's still the number-one reason for doing that, and when you do television, you have to sit down across from the person you're talking to, and so you don't do that by telephone. Radio, we can do by telephone and frequently do when we need a quick comment from the secretary of agriculture on a breaking story. But I'll be going to Washington early in March. Primary reason for that trip is I'm a member of the Board of Trustees of the National 4-H Council. We meet twice a year. So I'll be spending two days at the 4-H center at that meeting. But at the same time, when I'm not in sessions there, I'll be interviewing some of the members of the House agriculture committee on where we stand in implementing the Farm Bill. And if the new secretary of agriculture is available, I would do some—because there's always new news every day, from the

secretary's standpoint. Then I'll go back a week later to Washington, where I'll emcee the Agriculture Day luncheon and dinner. It's a day when Washington pays tribute to the agricultural industry with recognition—a National Press Club lunch, and FFA members, officers, are there as part of it, and I'll emcee the two events.

DePue: How much are you an advocate, then, for agriculture?

Samuelson: On Capitol Hill, I also get asked by members of the two ag committees and by the secretary, What's going on, what are you hearing from your farmers, what are they thinking, what seems to be the mood? In the case of Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns, who was the secretary a couple of years ago—he's now been elected to the Senate from Nebraska—but he liked to use television, and the RFD-TV network based in Nashville that carries our weekly television show—

DePue: RFD?

Samuelson: RFD-TV. It's an all-rural channel, and it's about seven years old, and it's become a very popular channel. It's available on the small dish—Direct TV, dish TV.

DePue: What do the letters stand for?

Samuelson: Well, RFD was Rural Free Delivery at one time, so that's why they have used that. But Secretary Johanns would like to use that as a public forum, and when he started to put together the farm bill, he did a four-hour live-audience telephone call-in show on what farmers would want, and he specifically asked me to be the host on the program. And he did that, I think, five times during the time that he was in Washington. And whenever he was going to do a TV show, he said, "If you're available, we'll do it; if you're not, we'll wait until you are," because he said he felt very comfortable with me and knew he would be treated fairly—not special, but that he'd be treated fairly in the questions and that sort of thing.

And then I've done four trade missions with secretaries of agriculture, where I've been invited to go as the media observer, but in every case, the secretary has asked me to sit in on some of the meetings they had with prime ministers and ministers of agriculture and that sort of thing.

DePue: It makes perfect sense to me that people, whether we're talking about congressmen or secretaries of agriculture, or even some of these foreign personalities you've had opportunities to meet, would look to you as the advocate for American farmers and speaking on their behalf. I wonder if you can address that in terms of your own personal views—having that role kind of thrust on you, perhaps.

Samuelson: I think they look at me more as a source of what's happening, and of course, that gets me into interpretation, and yeah, that gets me into probably a biased or prejudiced reporting, but that's basically the way they

approach it: What are your farmers—what are your listeners, farmers and ranchers—telling you when they correspond with you or when they talk to you at farm meetings? So I would say I'm more of a source for that kind of information to help a secretary or a House agriculture committee member—information that would help make up a policy question or that sort of thing. And then yeah, there are some advocacy issues—on the unwanted horse situation, for example. I'm not bashful in going up on the Hill and telling people that PETA is wrong and that you got to be careful what you wish for sometimes.

DePue: Well, let's turn the tables a little bit, then. You're in that role of oftentimes being asked to speak on behalf of farmers of the United States. What's your relationship with them? What are you hearing from them, and how do you hear that?

Samuelson: Basically, that's a very important part of our going to meetings, because while my time at the Cattlemen's Convention was three days, I probably spent a total of half a day doing interviews throughout that there-day session, and the rest of the time, I'm sitting in, listening to some of their policy discussions, in the hallway talking to them and finding out what they think. And the case of the Cattlemen's Convention, which is freshest in my mind, the word that I heard more than any other was "uncertainty"—uncertainty about the cost of inputs, the cost of production, what the markets are going to be, and all offering their thoughts, things that should be done. And to me, the most important part of communicating is listening, because you really can't respond until you've heard what they're saying.

DePue: Any particular incidents come to mind when you think about the feedback you've gotten or input you've gotten from farmers or farm communities that surprised you?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah, I think I've been surprised every once in a while. One of the more recent surprises that I got is the ongoing attempt to establish a National Animal Identification program. They want every livestock operator to register his premises, or her—

DePue: "They" being...?

Samuelson: USDA—the government, members of Congress. They say that when you have an outbreak of a disease, whether it's a peanut salmonella outbreak, which is our most recent one, or when you have a case of mad cow disease and the public gets concerned about where it happened, that we need to know and react as quickly as possible to finding the source so that we can say, "Okay, it happened at this peanut farm, at this peanut plant," and so we shut it down until we get it corrected, and that sort of thing. And so when they said, "We're going to have a National Animal Identification Act," I said, "Boy, I'm 100 percent in favor of this" because, first of all, if there's an outbreak and they don't know where it comes from, then everything gets shut down and everybody loses money on it. If there's a

mad cow disease outbreak and they have no idea where that cow has been and how many other cows might be infected, so you shut down the whole thing until you find it, whereas if you had Animal ID, you could go right to that source and say, "Okay, it came from this ranch in Montana. That's the only place this animal has been; that's where it's from." Well, the reaction from producers was anger. It is an emotional response, and—

DePue: Anger directed at you?

Samuelson: At the idea, and then anger at me because I said, "I'm in favor of this." And they said, "Well, yeah, you're part of corporate America. You want to know where we are so that we can be taxed more, and all that sort of thing," and "Yeah, you want Big Brother to watch us so that we're under control and all that." I said, "No, that's not the reason I want it. I think it'll benefit all of us." But that's probably the most recent one that surprised me with the emotion. It was not nice. Now, I also heard from a lot of people who said, "You're absolutely right. It will benefit all of us if we can find that—" And it's not something unusual. If you are a producer for Gerber Baby Foods, you have a contract that says every acre of carrots that you grow for Gerber's baby food, you keep a total record—what day you planted it, what you put on that ground, everything, so that if there is a contamination issue in Gerber's baby food, they can come right back to the very field and immediately get the thing corrected. So it's not something that's new to agriculture, but boy, the livestock people didn't like it—and don't like it. We haven't gotten it done yet.

DePue: Do you recall any other instances where you got crossways with your listening public?

Samuelson: Oh, I guess—oh, man, I'd have to go back to try to remember some. Because it has happened. Every once in a while, it'll happen, where they'll, in their e-mails, question my relationship to my mother and all that sort of thing, (laughter) and get pretty strong on their comments on how wrong I am. Well, on the horse issue, there are those—you know, the PETA people will let me know. So yeah, there are other instances. I think I'm loved more than a lot of people, (laughter) but there are times when I'm not loved, too. But as I say on *Samuelson Sez*, my mission is to stimulate thinking. You don't have to agree with me. I don't expect that. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't agree with editorial people always, but if I can get you to thinking about it and stimulating thought, then maybe that leads to discussion, and that could take us to a solution that would be agreeable.

DePue: How long have you been doing *Samuelson Sez*?

Samuelson: I think about thirty years.

DePue: And what's the purpose of that?

Samuelson: It meets the same purpose as the editorial page on a newspaper, or farm magazines do editorials where they'll comment and express their feeling

on issues. What it does, it gives me an opportunity to do a better job of keeping editorial bias out of news stories, if I have a place to put it. Because when I report a story on Animal Identification Program and where it is, it's a straight story. You know, we have signed up this many ranches and farms, and people who are refusing to sign up say this is the reason, and people who are signing up say this is the reason—and that's a news story. But when I say, "I think we ought to do it," then that's an editorial, so that helps me separate.

DePue: I've seen this in written format, but is this also broadcast as well?

Samuelson: It starts on the TV show, and then the—and it's ad-lib. So then we take that and put it on radio, on WGN and on about 120 other radio stations that carry it—it's a syndicated show. And then about five years ago, I was approached by a syndicator of newspaper columns, agriculture. And so I think now I'm probably syndicated in about thirty rural newspapers—weekly papers, basically.

DePue: With some of the other news media, you'll find that there are journalists, there are commentators, and ne'er the twain shall meet, and it seems that you're crossing that boundary. Do you have any reflections on that?

Samuelson: Really, something I've done—and as I say, the reason I wanted to do the editorial was to keep me honest on story reporting.

DePue: Now, I'm going to put you on the spot, probably, on this one, Orion—

Samuelson: That's okay.

DePue: —but it occurs to me that if there is such a thing as a celebrity in the agricultural world, agricultural broadcasting, certainly, you're it.

Samuelson: Well, Max Armstrong's a celebrity. (laughs)

DePue: Okay, the two of you together. What's your thought when you've got—you two are the face of agriculture for a lot of people, and yet you have all of these producers, these farmers out here, who are toiling away, who can be the absolute best at what they do, and nobody even knows that they exist.

Samuelson: And that is so unfair. They are so busy doing what they do so well that they don't have time to go out and tell their story. And that's one of the reasons I'm an advocate for them, because I have a voice. I've got a 50,000-watt transmitter, and I've got a satellite news channel, and I've got several television channels that carry our show, and I have a voice that they don't have. I guess if they were 50 percent of the population, I probably wouldn't be as enamored with the idea that somebody needs to be an advocate for what they do, but when they're 2 percent, I think I can serve a purpose, to help people who might pass laws that would make it difficult to farm.

And that's one of my concerns, that we're passing rules and regulations in agricultural production today that ultimately could drive that

production out of the U.S., where we'd have no control at all over what growing practices or humane practices are used with livestock. And that's one of my concerns, and that's why I try to explain to the non-farm audience why we do what we do in agriculture, and the fact that farmers are very careful. That's why I love doing the Environmental Stewardship Award winners, because those are real positive stories about what these families do in the way of conservation, in the way of no-tillage, in the way of wildlife habitat, and all of the other things they do that nobody knows about if we don't have a television show to share the interview with them and scenes of what they do on their farm. There's no other show out there like us, and so I just—yeah, I'm an advocate.

DePue: You mentioned a couple things here, so let's go back to your relationship with politicians, and I'm thinking especially presidents. How many presidents have you met in your career?

Samuelson: Every president since Eisenhower.

DePue: And what have been the reasons, the opportunities you've had to meet them?

Samuelson: Well, Farm Broadcaster conventions in Washington, where we do get invited to the White House. In the case of Ronald Reagan, among other things, I was on the list for consideration for secretary of agriculture. And I was asked to emcee his hometown birthday party in Dixon, Illinois, when he celebrated the birthday. And Bill Clinton, at a farmer forum where I was in the audience, but he wanted to chat afterwards, just a little bit.

DePue: A farmer himself.

Samuelson: Yeah, right. And the Bushes, both H.W. and George W. I was in George W's Oval Office when he recognized the four National Outstanding Young Farmers, which is a program I've emceed since 1965. And so I was in the office with them to visit with him. And his dad, out at the Farm Progress Show, and then I had dinner with his dad and Barbara in Beijing, China, at the World Food Production conference. So various reasons for getting together with them. John Kennedy was an interesting story. I did not meet him as president, but when he was in the primaries in 1959, I was still in Green Bay, Wisconsin, at WBAY, and Wisconsin was an important state, so he came to the state a couple of times. And he came to Green Bay and held a news conference after meeting with Democratic groups, and I asked a couple of questions about agriculture. And when the press conference ended, one of the campaign aides came up and said, "Do you have twenty minutes?" And I said, "Well, yeah." He said, "The senator would like to talk to you about agriculture because you seem to know what the issues are." So I sat in the bar at the Northland Hotel in Green Bay in 1959 for twenty-five minutes, talking agriculture (laughs) with John F. Kennedy. And it's, I say, various reasons, you know, that I've been lucky enough to come together. And the one time I was invited to

dinner at the White House was Richard Nixon. Nineteen seventy-two, Norman Borlaug, who is one of my heroes—he's Norwegian, he's an Iowa farm boy—and he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1972 for his work on the Green Revolution.

DePue: Feeding the world.

Samuelson: Feeding the world. As a matter of fact, his book, *The Man Who Fed the World*, is fascinating reading if people have not read it. So the president and Mrs. Nixon said, "Well, we're going to have a salute to agriculture at the White House." They had combines and tractors on the White House lawn, and then 160 were invited to dinner. I don't know how I got on that list, but I was on that list, and my wife and I went to dinner. I sat at my table—because they separated husbands and wives, had them at separate tables—and I sat at a table with Bob Dole, who—he and I went on to become good friends—and Glen Campbell, who was the entertainment for that night. So it was interesting to see the emcee for the entertainment program, Richard Nixon, who was about as stiff as emcee (laughter) as I had ever seen. But that salute to agriculture for Norman Borlaug was just a great thing on behalf of agriculture that President Nixon did.

DePue: I think it's a sad thing that very few people even recognize the name anymore—Norman Borlaug.

Samuelson: I know. I keep mentioning it, and I keep mentioning the book, because the book is well-written, and when I was in India with Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman in the late nineties, we went to the university where he did most of his work in Northern India, and there is a building there that is—it's the University of Ludhiana, and there's a building there that is named after Norman Borlaug. And over the door going into that building is an inscription that reads, "Everything else can wait. Agriculture can't." There were about 600 Indian farmers that came to the meeting with Secretary Glickman. And oh, you mention Borlaug to any of them, and yeah, what he did for them was just remarkable.

DePue: Any of those presidents that you named that you felt had a special affinity or understanding of farmers and farmers' problems?

Samuelson: I think Lyndon Johnson had a pretty good understanding. George W. Bush had a good understanding. He'd go to farm conventions. He went to the Cattlemen's Convention a couple of times. And Ronald Reagan had a good understanding, but John Block from Illinois—that's who he selected as secretary of agriculture.

DePue: A farmer from Galesburg, I believe.

Samuelson: Yep, Knox County, Galesburg. Yeah, that was the year that I was on the list, but I was seven or eight down the list. And it was kind of funny, because I called—when I found out I was on the list and they asked me to send my material to the Pacific White House—I called Earl Butz who, you know, was retired secretary of agriculture and a good friend. And I said,

"Earl," I said, "My name is on the list. What do you think?" "Well," he said, "Orion, I'll tell you. First thing you got to know is that if you're secretary, half of the people will like you; half of them will hate you." (laughter) And then the other thing he said, "You know," he said, "you'd make a very good secretary, but I think you can do more for agriculture where you are, because you can come into Washington and walk into Republicans' or Democrats' offices and do your job," and he said, "In the long run, you'll do more for agriculture doing what you're doing than if you were secretary of agriculture." (laughs) So.

But that same year, in August, at the Illinois State Fair, I went to dinner with Jack at the country club in Springfield. And we got to talking election and politics and the fact that Ronald Reagan was running. I said, "You know, Jack," I said, "you could become secretary of agriculture. What would you say if you got the offer?" And he said, "Oh, that'll never happen." And I said, "Well, I think he's got a good shot at being elected," and I said, "Remember, Jim Thompson, good friend, big booster, and he could very well swing it your way." "Oh, no, that'll never happen."

Well, I'm sitting at this desk later that year, and I think it—well, it was after Reagan won the election—and the phone rings. And I pick up the phone, and he said, "Orion, this is Bob." Okay, I know a lot of Bobs. And I said, "Bob?" He said, "Yeah, Bob Dole." I said, "Okay, Senator." I said, "To what do I owe this call?" He said, "Well," he said, "I need some help on secretary of agriculture and who to recommend—Dick Ling, who I know—former assistant secretary and," he said, "John Block. I don't know anything about John Block." So I said, "Well, let me tell you about him." So we went on. I probably talked twenty minutes with him. And John ultimately got the job.

DePue: What were the highlights at that time for John?

Samuelson: For John? The fact that he was a dirt farmer and he was a hog farmer from Illinois, and that we had not had a real farmer in that secretary spot for a while. We were coming out of a very tumultuous time in agriculture. Jimmy Carter was president, and Bob Bergland, a former congressman from Minnesota, was secretary of agriculture. And that's when American Ag Movement came to town and stormed his office, and he had to leave through a side door to get out and all that sort of thing.

DePue: This is after the grain embargo, was it not?

Samuelson: Yeah. Yep. And so that's who John followed. And the fact that he was from a farm and had been active in Farm Bureau and active in the Pork Producers and all that... He went through a time that was worse financially—I mean, that was the beginning of the terrible eighties for farmers—and did very well, but part of it was because he was a farmer. And he served one term under Reagan, and during that time, he went to Moscow and signed the first U.S.-Soviet grain agreement—a formal agreement that would give us an idea of what to plan for from a sales

standpoint. And he invited me to go along with him as the media observer on that trip, and so here's this Wisconsin dairy farmer standing in the halls of Kremlin and watching the gallons of vodka and the gallons of caviar (laughter) being consumed and signing the agreement. It's the only time I've ever been intimidated, because I was doing a stand-up on the bridge leading into the Kremlin. I was going to do *Samuelson Sez*, and the subject basically was going to be, I don't care how tough things are in the U.S.; you wouldn't want to produce under the regime that farmers in this country have to produce under, and so count your blessings. Well, as we're setting up the camera, more and more people are starting to gather, because at that point, a U.S. television crew wasn't commonplace. And people are beginning to just kind of stand around. (laughs) And I look out there and I think, "Man, what if it's KGB and they hear me say what I'm about to say and they confiscate my tape and I come back home with nothing?" so I didn't say it.

DePue: Do you recall what you did end up saying?

Samuelson: I just said something about, It's a grain agreement that's important to the United States. When I got back, I did say (laughter) what I was thinking then. But I really argued with myself. Should I be that intimidated? And yet, if I come back with no tape, then the whole trip is lost, really. And so I took the safe route.

DePue: Was that your first overseas trip?

Samuelson: Oh, no. No, no. No, my first overseas trip—well, prior to that, I guess my first overseas trip was to some of the Iron Curtain countries, along with Scandinavia, as part of the American Soybean Association tour. And we visited several countries that were potential markets for U.S. soybeans. And a fairly large group; there were probably forty soybean farmers and their wives on the trip. And that was the first major trip I'd taken. But in '72, again, Earl Butz invited me to go along on a thirty-day trade mission, where we had our own Air Force 707. And we flew to Honolulu and Guam, and the Vietnam War was on, so we had to fly around Vietnam and land at Bangkok, and then we went from Bangkok to Manila, Manila to Taipei, and Taipei to Seoul, Korea, and Seoul to Tokyo, and then a brief stop in Hawaii on the way back. It was a full thirty days. And what an eye-opener that was—first of all, on how a Cabinet officer travels and the protocol—the political, diplomatic protocol—and then the agriculture that we saw that I would never have had the chance to see without being with a Cabinet officer.

DePue: What struck you about the agriculture that you're seeing in all these countries? Because you're seeing a variety of different levels of economic development.

Samuelson: Yeah. Well, first of all, overall, it was just archaic compared to what we had in this country. You know, you'd see a rice farmer in the Philippines with an acre and a half, and then you'd get to Tokyo, where you'd see a

wheat farmer with maybe twenty-two acres or thirty acres, but much more progressive agriculture mechanically and that sort of thing.

DePue: But even so, they were very heavily subsidized, were they not?

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. And they're the size of California—a population of 123 million people—and, as was pointed out then and was still the case, 85 percent of their food supply was on ships heading from Japan. Now, that puts you in a pretty—you could almost see why they started World War II, because they really are vulnerable to people who can control food supply, fuel supply, and raw material supply.

DePue: Well, it was scrap metal and oil, and both of those are kind of essential to shipbuilding industries as well.

Samuelson: Oh, darn right they are. But that early in my career, it was an absolutely fascinating trip, and then in '78, I went to China for the first time with an Illinois delegation appointed by Governor Thompson.

DePue: The purpose for that trip?

Samuelson: To let them know—we hadn't normalized relations at that point—but Governor Thomspon, he just had a feeling that with Nixon going to China and opening up China that they would become a buyer, and so he wanted them to know that, by golly, Illinois had what they needed.

DePue: What was it in particular that they—was it soybeans, was it meat products?

Samuelson: Basically soybeans, corn, and wheat on that trip, although we did take a purebred boar along with us, which was a story unto itself, getting through Tokyo and Shanghai airports, but we gave that purebred registered board to the Chinese land-grant university to increase their breeding program. And we named him Big Jim. (laughter) And he died in six months, because they had a cat disease in China, transmissible to hogs, that we had no immunity for in this country. But that's a whole other story, and I'm going to have to go.

DePue: Okay.

(End of interview #2)

Interview with Orion Samuelson

Interview #3: February 3, 2009
Interviewer Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Good morning, Orion.

Samuelson: Good morning.

DePue: (laughs) Caught you by surprise, there.

Samuelson: Yes, indeed.

DePue: Today is Tuesday, February 3, 2009. My name is Mark DePue; I'm a volunteer with Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and this is a continuation of a series of interviews we had with Orion yesterday about your experiences in being the voice of agriculture for over fifty years, and nearly fifty of those at WGN radio.

Samuelson: Getting close—2010, God willing and the boss willing.

DePue: Well, we had to stop rather abruptly for one of those peculiar things, (laughter) like you had to be on the radio yesterday, and we were talking about—we'd just gotten you to China, and we were going through all the different countries—how many countries have you been in the world?

Samuelson: Forty-three countries that I have visited in the years that I've been here at WGN, and we've taken a television crew to nearly all of those countries. My first trip to China, could not take a TV crew along; they wouldn't allow it, but—

DePue: Well, tell me about that trip.

Samuelson: It was a fascinating trip. Governor Jim Thompson decided that even though we had not renewed diplomatic relations with China—we still had not--

DePue: What year was that?

Samuelson: That was 1978, and we went in April, and I think it was November of that year where the U.S. government finally recognized the People's Republic

of China. But when we were there, we did not officially recognize China. But Governor Thompson said, You know, there are—at that point, I think there were 800 million people at best guess in China—and he said, "They're going to need food; they're going to need agricultural technology; they're going to need seed; they're going to need equipment, and so we ought to go over there and let them know that Illinois has the goods that they're going to need," whether it be tractors and combines and that sort of thing. And so he appointed—I think there were fourteen of us—or eighteen. There were eighteen of us representing Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, some of the other commodity groups. And I was invited to go along on the trip. All I could take on that trip was an eight-millimeter camera, because the Chinese had allowed an Italian film crew to come in the year before with sixteen-millimeter film, and they shot a documentary and took it back to Italy and put it together, and it was just devastating to China. So the thinking in China was, If anybody comes in with a sixteen-millimeter camera, look out for them, because they're going to hurt us. So I did take in an eight-millimeter—the best one we could find—and we did come back with usable video of what it was like on the farm. But we spent two weeks in China, and in Northern China, where it was still cold—snow was on the ground. We had three guide/interpreters. We had a gentleman in his late forties who was a member of the Communist Party, Mr. Yen, and then he had two younger associates who were not members. And it was not all that easy to become a member of the Communist Party; you really had to work and prove yourself. So—

DePue: And this isn't too far after the Cultural Revolution.

Samuelson: No. No, it isn't. As a matter of fact, it was relatively close to the Cultural Revolution, and when life had really been disrupted in colleges and universities. And the two young associates were trying to impress Mr. Yen (laughter) that they ought to become a member of the Communist Party. So we did get into some interesting discussions with Mr. Yen, and we kind of went back and forth at each other on the whole trip—never angry, but we were making a point.

DePue: The benefits of capitalism versus socialism?

Samuelson: Versus socialism. And he kept telling me that everyone in China is equal, and we'd go out to the communes—the farm communes—and you'd walk into one room with two shelves on the wall that were beds for the people who lived there, and you had a round hole in a raised concrete structure, and you put your fire inside there, and you did the cooking over the hole, and then you had a table and a couple of chairs. And even at that point, they were beginning to curtail population growth, and so in the Chinese culture, it was important to have a son, a male heir, so they wouldn't talk about it, but it was obvious that very often baby girls ended up in the irrigation canals because they knew they could have one child. But it was an absolutely fascinating trip. I saw a world that I didn't realize existed. We stayed in the Peking Hotel where foreign guests stayed—that was the

only place we could stay—and the capital was still called Peking at the time. And so the first day I'm there, I'm on the fourteenth floor, and I open the window and look out at the street below me, and it is filled with bicycles; as far as the eye can see, it was bicycles. And whoever built the main thoroughfare—it was an eight-lane thoroughfare, and the four outer lanes—no, it was ten lanes—the four outer lanes on each side for bicycle traffic, and then they put the vehicle traffic in the two middle lanes. So it was a circus watching from up there as these cars would come down the middle lane and then have to turn right in front of four lanes of bicycles. And how they kept from killing people, I never ever did figure out.

But the—Chairman Mao had died by that time. I spent a very interesting Easter Sunday there, because there were two churches serving the Western diplomatic corps. So I went to church, conducted by a Chinese minister who somehow had survived the purge—I still don't know. It was conducted in Chinese, and there were Africans there, and there were Germans, and there were Norwegians, and there was our group. And then there was a Catholic church that served the community. So in the morning, we worshipped our god, and then in the afternoon, we were taken to the tomb of Chairman Mao, where his body was on display, and it was unbelievable to see Tiananmen Square filled with people, but all standing in military platoon files. They were—

DePue: Civilians.

Samuelson: Yeah, civilians. They were waiting to see Chairman Mao. And they were orderly. There was no moving around. They stood in line, and they'd be in groups, and then they'd be moved forward. Well, we had nine cars for our group. We had two Americans in the backseat of each car, and a madman behind the steering wheel. (laughter) We had some riding experiences that were unbelievable. But anyway, we were driven right to the head of the lines. We got out, and we got in line, and there were two lines going on each side of Chairman Mao's body. And as I walked by, I looked across at the other line, and you know, crying, tears rolling down their cheeks. And I finished that, and I wrote a letter to my pastor saying, "Well, today, I saw the Chinese worship their god, and I had the opportunity to worship mine." It culturally was just fascinating. And I wore cowboy boots on the whole trip, and I'm a fairly tall person, and Chinese kids just stared, because they'd never—you know, if you were under thirty years of age, you hadn't seen Americans, really, because it had been closed to us until '72, when Nixon went over there for the first time.

So one of the things we did—we took a purebred boar from Illinois to China, because we knew that China had 240 million pigs. Here in the U.S., sixty million is about the average number at any one time. But these pigs were just running loose. They weren't being fed for food; they were being used for fertilizer, because whenever a pig dropped its thing, somebody picked it up and put it on the field, if the pig wasn't already on the field. And so I described the pig as the ugliest pig I'd ever seen—the

Meishan breed, and we have brought them back to the University of Illinois for research. And the Meishan pig was ugly, and it was probably 300 pounds of lard hanging on a backbone, is what it was.

So we took the boar over there to go to an agricultural school, with the idea that they would begin a breeding program, and then when they were able to inport corn and soybeans from us, they'd get into a nutrition feeding program, and that would be the beginning of the exports to that country, and so it was a goodwill gesture. We named (laughs) the boar Big Jim, and when we got out to the university hog farm—not—well, it was a government hog farm—everything was government. And I saw the Meishan pig—ugliest pig I've ever seen—and somebody in our group said, "We're going to have to put a paper bag over Big Jim's head before he'll make love to that." (laughter) You know, it was just this ugly pig. But the thing that it had—in this country, I think average litter size would be nine baby pigs. That pig did twenty-five to twenty-eight baby pigs. Didn't have enough faucets to feed them all, but that was—I mean, we had some animals—well, we had Dr. Orville Bentley, dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois with us, and we had some other university scientists, and they were just astounded with this. Big Jim lived six months, because they have a disease in that country—a cat disease—transmissible to pigs that we don't have in this country, and so there was no immunity. So we don't know how many offspring Big Jim was able to breed while he was alive over there, but that was one of—getting Big Jim into the country (laughs) through Japan, because we had to land at Tokyo for refueling before we went into Shanghai, and it was an interesting time.

The one other—well, there are many memorable moments, but the other one that I'll take time for. They arranged the areas that we would visit and pretty much dictated where we could go and what we could do. We went to a tractor factor in Changchun, China, which is a little town of three and a half million people. Tallest building in town was three stories. So we visited the tractor factory. I got a very unique picture there—a picture of Hans Becherer, who later became CEO of Deere & Company at Moline—I got him sitting on a red tractor in China. So I've kind of blackmailed—I mean a green tractor guy doesn't sit on a red tractor. But we kept saying, "We want to go to an agricultural university," and we got all sorts of reasons. "No, the roads are too bad. It's too far, and we just can't take you to the university or the college." We knew why. It had been totally disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. The professors had been sent to the fields. And so we kept insisting, and finally, they said, "We'll bring the professors to you."

And we were in Changchun, China, which is in the northern part of the country. We were staying in a hotel they opened for us that had been there a long time. And the more we walked around, it was a magnificent hotel at one time—it was in total disrepair now—no heat, and in March, it was in the twenties. And we finally determined it was a rest camp for

Japanese officers when the army occupied that part of China. And so that's where the Japanese officers would come and spend their R&R time. And it—I mean, there had been an indoor swimming pool—it was filled with broken furniture now. A rug that was about forty by sixty feet in the entryway that was—you could tell it had been absolutely beautiful. It was so dirty and stained and everything that there was no way that you could ever get it back. But they brought the professors.

They brought fourteen professors, and it was like watching a man in the desert dying of thirst suddenly finding water. I was just astounded, because all of them had been educated in the United States, and when we introduced Dean Orville Bentley to them from the University of Illinois, they just literally grabbed him, and they said, is this professor still alive, is this professor still at Purdue, is this professor still at Minnesota? And it was just phenomenal to watch it happen, because they had all gone to school here in the forties, before the Communist takeover, and then had gone back and had had no contact since because of it. And they stayed until two o'clock in the morning, and it was just phenomenal to watch.

And then the next morning, two of them came back and brought soybean seed from their experimental farm, because the soybean originated in China, and it was brought to this county by Henry Ford. And that started a dialogue that continues to this day. Dean Orville Bentley goes to China once a year and spends two weeks over there working, and he's an animal scientist, and he works with—or not Dean Bentley now; it's Dean Bob Easter. And he's over there for two weeks every year, working with the Chinese on nutrition. And it all really started, I think, with that visit in 1978.

DePue: Well, that is fascinating. I assume all of the places you went in terms of farms were collective farms. I wonder if you could reflect on the contrast you saw on those collective farms versus what you knew in the United States at that time.

Samuelson: It was impossible to make a comparison, because there was nothing there from a structural standpoint, an infrastructure standpoint, a technology standpoint, that was like anything we had seen here. The families lived in these one-roomed—now, the building would probably be 200 feet long, and it'd be one room and one room and one room, and that's where the families would live. Schooling was arranged, of course, and taken care of. Many of the children, as they matured and were ready to go into other school, were taken from the parents, and they were taken to schools in cities so they could be properly educated, after they passed tests that showed they had real potential. And in some cases, they would never see their parents again. And I managed to talk to one set of parents who spoke some English, and I said, "Do your children go away?" and they said, "Yeah." And depending on their ability as an athlete or their ability as a student, why, yeah, the government takes care of all that.

The method of production was all hand labor. The fields are very small. The farms may be large, but the farms at one time were small farms that were owned, and then totally taken over by the government. And so while the fields are small, the farms now are very, very large. And they were given an assignment: they had to produce so much rice or so much whatever the crop—they were assigned—they made no decision on what they would plant. That was all assigned from the central government in Peking. And then they had to meet that goal, and then whatever they raised over it, then they could use to feed themselves and to feed the commune.

But as I looked in these one-room homes, I finally said to Mr. Yen, I said, "So this is the way Chinese people live?" "Yes, this is the way, and they're taken care of. They pay no rent, and medicine is free." And I said, "What about Chairman Mao? Did he live like this?" "Oh, yes, he certainly did." And I said, "Well, let me tell you how I live." I said, "I have three-bedroom home. I have two automobiles." And I said, "I use an airplane to get to many of my meetings." Because he'd been irritating me, and so I kind of laid it on him. (laughter) And he looked at me, and he said, "Well then you are part of the 4 percent of the imperialists who live wealthy, and the other 96 percent live in extreme poverty in your country." He said, "You're just part of the 4 percent. We know what your country does to people who are poor." And that was the exchange that we had. (laughs)

DePue: And there was no convincing him otherwise, was there?

Samuelson: No, no convincing him otherwise. And I said to him, I said, "I hope someday you can come to America, and you can come to my house, and you can see not only me, but all of my neighbors, who pretty much live the same way." And I said, "I am not considered a wealthy person in my country. I am considered comfortable, but not wealthy." He never did accept it.

The other thing that was interesting—we did fly Chinese airlines at times to get to where we were going. And they were Russian airplanes, versions of the 727 that we had in this country. It was the Russian airplane. And the first time we did, I got into the airplane, and I couldn't sit, because the seats were too close, and I was too tall. I could get halfway down in the seat, and that was it. I said, "Mr. Yen," I said, "I can't sit." "Oh. Okay, well, follow me." So we went to the front of the airplane, and there was a first class, (laughter) in the front of the airplane. And I turned to Mr. Yen, and I said, "I thought you said everybody was the same. Here's the first—" "No, no, no, this is for military people. They can spread their maps out so they can work while they're flying. (laughs)

DePue: I would guess you didn't believe him that Mao was living the same way as—

Samuelson: Of course not. Of course not. (laughter) It simply wasn't true.

DePue: Tell us about some of the other places, and I'm especially curious to hear your reactions and your opinions about what's going on in South America—in particular, Brazil and Argentina.

Samuelson: It's an interesting story, because in 1960, when I came to WGN, Brazil and Argentina was South America, and certainly no factor. It was nothing that we were interested in, because they weren't a factor in the world market production and that sort of thing. And it was after the soybean embargo that President Nixon imposed in the early seventies that Japan said, "Hey, we can't put all of our eggs in one basket. We need soybeans for cooking oil for the human diet, and now they've shut it down, and we can't take a chance on their government doing this to us again," so they started looking for a place in the world that had the climate and the soil we did, and they found Brazil first, and then they found Argentina. But they started in Brazil, and they put millions of yen into developing a soybean industry in Brazil. And literally, we were alone in the soybean export market with no competition, and by the mid-eighties, late eighties, they were a factor.

So now we have to start paying attention to them. We pay attention to their weather at this time of year. When it's winter here, we watch their weather. This year, we're looking at an extreme drought in Argentina, and it's affecting our prices at the Board of Trade every day until they get rain, and so now we have to pay attention. And so then we decided, We're going to have to go down there and see for ourselves what the land is like, what the farmers are like, and how serious a threat they are to our producers in the export market. So my partner Max and I made several trips down to Brazil and Argentina. Max has gone into Argentina more than I have, but these are farmers that know what they're doing, and they have the acres. They have millions of acres. And I'm not talking about clearing the Amazon to grow soybeans; they've got more than enough acres to grow without cutting the Amazon. And they have all of the technology. The American companies now have moved down there. Manufacturers of farm equipment are there with factories, and the grain companies—the Cargills and the ADMs and the Bunges—are all down there doing the marketing.

And it's gotten to the point where interestingly enough, American soybean growers say, Okay, they are our competition, but maybe we can work together in researching soybeans and in promoting and marketing soybeans. So there are some joint ventures between their association and our associations that are working in India to improve diets there with the soybean protein, working in Africa, where there's a lot of work being done, particularly in the AIDS communities. So we've had the opportunity to go down, get a firsthand look at it, and understand that they're going to be around. They're not going away, and so we have to learn to work with them at the same time we compete with them. But again, the one thing about farmers that is universal—I have yet to meet one that makes enough

money, but then, I don't make enough either, and nobody else does. You know, we all think we should make more than we're making, probably. But that's universal in farmers—not making enough money—and secondly, they don't like government, but they still have to depend on (laughs) government, to very often make a living during difficult times.

DePue: I would guess also that each one of them is complaining about the current weather conditions or something else—the current role of the dice—maybe that's the way to put it.

Samuelson: I think it is. The one thing about farmers, too—and I say this lovingly, because I grew up on a farm, and I remember how my dad thought and how I thought, growing up on the farm—that you're always worried about tomorrow. So in a lot of my speeches, I tell—like last year, when we had record-high prices for the commodities. I said, "Take a minute to enjoy it." Because I'd say, "Hey, this is pretty good, isn't it?" "Yeah, but what's going to happen next year?" (laughter) And so I'd say, "Take a minute to enjoy it, and then you can worry about next year, but my golly you got to have a little fun with it once in a while." But I think it's a farmer's nature, because you're battling the unknown. You're battling weather, and you have no idea what that's going to do to you. You're battling government policy—not only our government, but governments around the world. We still have the European Union that will not let genetically modified plants come into the market in the European Union. We cannot ship hormone-fed beef to the European Union. And that's totally out of our control, but it has an impact on what we do.

DePue: Would you agree with this statement, that the American farmer is the ultimate entrepreneur?

Samuelson: Oh, absolutely. And the ultimate risk-taker. A few years ago, one of the big farm organizations decided to hold its convention in Las Vegas, and I went on the air, and I said, "Why would farmers go to Las Vegas? (laughter) They've got more than enough gambling on their own farm or ranch every day, so why go to Las Vegas, the gambling Mecca? You're gambling every day." But yeah, they are entrepreneurs, and the other thing (laughs) that farmers do—if I were an agricultural engineer, designing tractors or combines or other high-technology machines and spent my whole career developing this combine, I would be frustrated as all get-out, because I know the minute a farmer buys that combine, he's going to find something to change on that combine to make it work a little bit better for him, because farmers are innovators. They've had to over the years, and now they like it. We've got GPS. I remember growing up, seeing a cartoon in a farm magazine of ma and pa farmer standing at the edge of a field, watching this tractor without a cab and without a driver moving up and down the field. No driver; no hands. It was funny. It was a cartoon. Today, it's happening, and the technology that is coming down the line is just speeding up tremendously.

DePue: I wanted to shift gears and take you back into a few of those years when they were losing the role of the dice, and that's the 1980s. And I wonder if you can talk through some of the challenges that farmers had during those years.

Samuelson: We came out of the seventies, when it was plant fencerow-to-fencerow, and we had gotten into the export market, and it was the golden age of agriculture in the minds of some people. Earl Butz was our secretary of agriculture and a tremendous spokesman for agriculture and explaining what agriculture was doing and needed to do to feed people. And—

DePue: Then we got a farmer in the White House.

Samuelson: Then we got a farmer, and we also had a farmer as secretary of agriculture, John Block, during the Reagan administration. And we went from inflation—in the seventies, it was buy all the land you can and pay it back with cheaper dollars, because inflation will be with us forever—and you'd go to a country bank or you'd go to Farm Credit and say, "I need 100,000 operating loan," and they'd say, "Hey, you can have 200,000." It's there, and it's cheap credit.

DePue: Do you recall what the inflation rate was in the late seventies, early eighties?

Samuelson: I don't recall the inflation rate, but I do remember early eighties when we hit a 21 percent prime rate, and that's when the world turned around. And it's interesting, because you see the parallel today in the housing industry, and it proves we ought to pay more attention to history. We just don't learn. But in the eighties, we had farms that were valued up to here, and the mortgage was valued up to here, and then came the 21 percent prime rate, and then came the decline in demand. The values of the farm started to go down, down, and down, but the mortgage was still up here. And it got to the point where mortgages on farms were higher than the value of the farm, and then that's when the foreclosures really started. Banks were operating under laws that said, You have to do this, or we'll have to foreclose. And we went through the shout-downs on the courthouse steps. Every night on television, you'd see another foreclosure, and it was just a terrible, disruptive time in agriculture. We come out of the golden age—times are good; they'll always be good—we come into this terrible time. I lost track of the number of letters I got from parents saying, "Boy, if there's one thing I do before I die, it's to make sure my kids don't be involved in farming. I don't want my kids to go through the pain and the hurt that we're going through, so I'm not going to let my kids farm. That's the last thing I want them to do."

DePue: Was there a—

Samuelson: And I heard that time and again.

DePue: Was there a reduction in demand?

Samuelson: There was a reduction in demand because we had produced so much. I would say we had overproduced; the demand held fairly strong, but we were just producing a lot more.

DePue: Well, I know Payment-in-Kind Program came—

Samuelson: The PIK Program.

DePue: —in 1983. Tell us a little bit about that.

Samuelson: (laughs) Complicated. I didn't have to do it, but farmers did. And one thing farmers know how to do is to farm government programs. (laughter) And John Block was the secretary of agriculture at the time, and it was—I just can't really explain it. I never really understood the PIK Program, but there were moves where if you did this in South—if you lived in Illinois, but you did this trading in South Dakota or North Dakota or Minnesota, you could play the cards on that in the PIK Program. PIK Program, I think did help a lot of people. Served its purpose.

DePue: To reduce supply?

Samuelson: To reduce supply, and to bring some stability back to prices. But the thing that agriculture didn't do was run off to Washington and say, you've got to do something about the mortgages; you've got to do something about this and that. And the farm credit system that was on the verge of total failure managed to bring itself out of it, and by the end of the decade, yeah, we had had some transformation of farm owners. Those that were heavily mortgaged and not good managers were gone. They lost it. They moved to town. But it brought in some younger farmers who now were looking at land that was very cheap compared to what it had been at the start of the eighties. And so we have this movement where some of the farmers were gone, but others were there to take their place. And as you look back on it, one person said, "You know, it's kind of like a forest fire. It burns what's there, but then once the fire is over, the next crop comes on."

DePue: Well, it's interesting. You're in China in 1978, and you see that system, and you come back to the United States and experience the whole 1980s, and you see the painful side of capitalism, if you will.

Samuelson: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And it was very painful. And you know, you'd go on the air, and you'd empathize with farmers who were in trouble, but on the other hand, you had to try to help and encourage those who were doing a good management job. And it wasn't always their fault for getting into trouble. I remember a letter that I got from a farmer up in Central Wisconsin, and he and his wife had a dairy farm—a successful dairy farm, fully paid for. Son got married, came back from the university, and wanted to go into the business with the family. The family mortgaged the paid-for farm to add more cows, to build an additional barn, and to get all of this in place so that it could support two families, and now the whole thing was going down. Just simply going down and not making it. (phone rings) Your light went off, too, and I forgot to unplug this.

(Pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, just a very quick technical break here. What I wanted to mention here, and we were just talking about the hard times of the eighties—I read that 1986, maybe that was one of the deepest years. Prices were at 51 percent of parity, and I would think anybody's going to have a hard time making a profit in years like that.

Samuelson: Especially if they had a debt. There were some farmers who were debt-free, and so they just kept doing what they were doing, but yeah, it was, with that kind of a pricing situation.

DePue: And I guess not too surprising then that Willie Nelson and others decided, we need to do something to help our farmers, and they started these Farm Aid concerts. Can you talk about that a little bit.

Samuelson: I can. I never attended one. I was not impressed by the idea, and when we tried to follow up with the people who put the Farm Aid concerts together to see how the money was being spent to help farmers—because I would get—I think the first Farm Aid concert that was announced, I got letters and phone calls from farmers saying, "Well, how do we apply to get some of that money to help us through this tough time?" And I could never get an answer from the promoters of the Farm Aid concert on what you do to get money. And they would keep putting me off when I'd say, "Well, where is it going? What is it doing?" And finally, the best answer that I could get after two or three years of trying was the fact that, Well, it's going to pay legal expenses, to do all of this, to improve conditions for farmers and to legislate new laws on foreclosures on that sort of thing. They were great entertainment venues, and I'm fine with Willie and John Mellencamp and all the rest of them who donated—I think they donated their time—and that's fine. They were great concerts. They did draw a lot of attention. But when it came down to physically helping farmers, I could never find that this farm family that was on the verge of losing the farm got a hundred thousand–dollar check from Farm Aid, and it saved the farm. I could never, ever find that, so.

DePue: What was it that finally turned the corner for American agriculture, that pulled them out of those doldrum years?

Samuelson: Prices improved. Smarter managers. People who went through the eighties without incurring a lot of debt, and they were in pretty good financial shape, and so they would acquire farms that were next to them that were in difficulty. And Farm Credit System got rid of its bad loans without a bailout from Congress and came back stronger than ever in the nineties. And it comes back once again also to what I keep saying. Prices never go the same way forever. There's always the change; there's always the price correction. And the mindset we get into, when times are good, we think

they'll always be good, and when times are bad, we think they'll always be bad, and then the word "change" comes in, and it begins to turn around.

DePue: Well, the one thing I do know about American agriculture—they didn't produce less soybeans or corn or beef cattle or hogs, so was there a growth in the market?

Samuelson: I think foreign markets improved, and we were doing a better job of promoting sales to foreign markets. The Soybean Association, the Corn Growers, the Grains Council, would take groups of farmers to Asia, to Europe, and into Africa, and promote our protein feeds for their livestock and poultry industries. And just a combination of things. It's about that time, too, that we started talking about alternative fuel and started talking about—well, we called it gasohol at first, and then it became ethanol. And then soy diesel, and it became biodiesel, because we don't just use soybeans to produce that—

DePue: Well, we certainly want to talk a lot, in depth, about those issues here, as we get farther along. I would like to have you talk a little bit about the Freedom to Farm Act, 1996, I believe, and you've emphasized how important that has been.

Samuelson: To me, that was the beginning of change in agricultural policy, because up to that point, agricultural policy was based on you had to grow corn, you had to grow soybeans, you had to grow wheat, whether the market was there for it or not. That's how the programs were put together. You had to keep records; you had to be in constant touch with your county ASCS office, as it was called then. It's now the Farm Service Agency. And the programs really were geared to encouraging farmers to produce grains that weren't needed. And so—

DePue: Orion, this sounds like what was going on in China in 1978 when you visited.

Samuelson: It does. It does. Of course, it wasn't called communism. (laughter) It wasn't even called socialism.

DePue: It was called "government bureaucracy," maybe?

Samuelson: Yeah, it was. And you know, the rules that you had to follow. And wherever you get that kind of programs, you get some people—Billy Sol Estes, the Texas entrepreneur who just did all kinds of bad things with the cotton program, and when that exploded, the scandal was horrendous. And that brought people looking at the farm programs and how they're administered—pretty much today like banks, (laughs) and how banks are doing business and that sort of thing. Because if you farmed those government programs, you could do very, very well, and while producers kept saying, "We don't want our money from the government; we want it from the market...but if we can't get it from the market, we'll take it from the government." And so that's pretty much how we had geared the programs.

Then came 1996, and Bill Clinton was president. We had Mike Espy as secretary of agriculture, who didn't stay around too long, and then Dan Glickman, the Kansas congressman, became secretary of agriculture. And we had people in Congress like Charlie Stenholm from Texas, a Blue Dog Democrat, and we had Republican senators on the committee, and they started saying, There's got to be another way, because if we say you have to produce a product for which the market is not there, then we're back into the surplus business and the storage business and all of that. And so they loosened the reins on what you planted; they encouraged planting for what the market demanded; and then setting a level where if the price dropped below that, then there would be some assistance, but it wasn't going to amount to nearly what it was under the previous system. And that basically hasn't changed that much today. The latest farm bill that we wrote and came into being in 2008 really has more to do with feeding people than sending checks to farmers. Nearly two-thirds of the budget of the U.S. Department of Agriculture today is food stamps and nutrition programs for children and that sort of thing. So the amount of money being paid to farmers today is really down dramatically,

and with record-high prices in 2008, there was very little that went to farmers. Now, that'll change, because prices are lower, and so there is that support level there, but the current program really is based more on energy—developing energy, renewable sources of energy. A lot of research money that's going into that area. It's also being spent on the farmers who were basically left out of farm programs—the green industry, producers of fruits and vegetables, never really had any kind of a farm program—not even money for research that would improve the production and quality of what they were producing. That is a part of the new farm bill. So I would say the farm bill that was written back in 1990 or in the eighties—far different than what we're looking at today in a farm bill. And the reason they like to keep the food stamp program in a farm bill—that way you've got city (laughter) congressmen and senators that will say, "Okay, okay, to get what we want for nutrition for our people, yeah, we'll give you this, and we'll give you that." Because if you take the nutrition part of the program out of the USDA budget, farmers have very little leverage on Capitol Hill—very little.

DePue: And that's a trend because—now, 150 years ago, 40 or 50 percent of Americans were engaged in farming directly?

Samuelson: Oh, at least, yeah, 50 percent. Yeah.

DePue: And 2 percent today?

Samuelson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Does it bother you at all that the farmers seem to have such a small voice when you consider what percent of Illinois's working population is directly or indirectly engaged in agricultural business ventures?

Samuelson: Well, if you take it from the farm to the supermarket and everybody in between, then about 22 percent of the workforce derives a living from agriculture, agribusiness. But if you just look at the production part of it, Illinois would be pretty much on par with the national average—2 percent population. But then you've got the ADMs and you've got the Deeres and the Case-IHs, and you've got the fertilizer people and all that, so there are a lot more people that are directly involved in the production side of agriculture. It's the production, processing, retailing that makes up about 22 percent.

DePue: Would you agree with the statement that agriculture today, though, does not have a proportional voice in politics?

Samuelson: Oh, I would fully agree with that. And that trend is downward. Until we have something like last year, when there was the threat of food shortages, which were blown out of proportion—you know, it was Wal-Mart that started "we won't sell you more than twenty pounds of rice" and all that sort of thing—and we had more than enough rice. The thing about farmers—if the economic incentive is there, they can quickly change what they plant, because if corn brings better money than soybeans, hey, you bet we can plant corn. (laughter)

DePue: Let's go back to the 1996 act, and my very basic understanding, one of the things that was changed at that time was that the commodity price supports was supposed to gradually disappear. I think it was a seven-year window.

Samuelson: Right.

DePue: Did that actually occur?

Samuelson: Yeah, it did.

DePue: So that would be a huge change for agriculture, as well.

Samuelson: Yeah, well, that was the change in '96, because when you start planting and growing for what the market demands, then you're going to bring prices to a level where the subsidies do begin to phase out. To me, the basic change in '96 was freedom to plant what you want to plant. You don't have to plant corn in order to be a participant in the government farm program. And to me, that was the big change, and so that would phase out the subsidy payments.

DePue: Okay. I wonder if you could explain to us that perfect storm that hit hog farmers—I think it was 1998.

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah. Demand wasn't there. We weren't doing anything in the export market with pork. We weren't exporting any of it. Production was high because feed costs were low, and we just continued producing pork to the point where we didn't have enough packing plants that could process the hogs that were ready for market every week. Weights would then go up. If the hogs couldn't go to market this week, they'd be on feed

for next week, and so your weight would be up. It was an upward spiral on supply, and a downward spiral on the price. Supply and demand really came into play, and we saw hog prices down to nine, ten cents a pound, which—

DePue: But was there some—the farmers were guessing wrong that the market would continue to grow for hogs?

Samuelson: I'm not sure what went through their mind. I think the corn price was low enough that they could make, they thought, more money marketing their corn as pork rather than just marketing corn, so they would feed it, and they would add... And it was about that time that we started building larger hog farms that just really specialized in hog production. A lot of them didn't even do their own feed production; they would depend on neighbors to do that, and they would just concentrate on the hog-feeding end of it. And the expansion—I remember flying the Cessna across Iowa, and across Northern Iowa, looking down and seeing long barns that you knew were the barns for housing the hogs, and every time you'd fly out that way, you'd see more of them being built. It was a time of expansion, and demand simply didn't keep up with it, because we weren't in the export market. Now today, export market for pork is probably taking 20 to 26 percent of our total production. You put that up against nothing ten years ago, and it makes a major difference. And Mexico is our biggest buyer. Matter of fact, Mexico is the biggest buyer of pork and beef from the United States.

DePue: China is a growing market, India?

Samuelson: Those countries, not much in the way of meat. They do more importing of—well, China, soybeans. They buy more of our soybeans than any other country.

DePue: To use for hog feed and cattle feed, I would think.

Samuelson: Yeah, and human food. And human food. They take the oil, you know, for the cooking and the diet. But yes, they are using soybean meal for growing livestock, because milk has never really been part of the Chinese diet, but they're developing a like for milk, so you're seeing dairy farms go in. You're seeing China's corn acreage expand, but again, back to China, that is such a huge market, but the challenge that the Chinese government has is immense, because you can't move the people off the farms, because then you get the problem in the cities. And so instead of mechanizing, you have to keep a lot of hand labor on those farms, and it does limit production.

When we visited there in 1978, the thing they talked about more than anything else that they needed was fertilizer. And they were building, at the time we were there, fourteen fertilizer plants. And to those—that's one thing I say to people in this country who say, "Well, we ought not use chemical fertilizer, and we ought not put this on the soil" and all that.

Well, China has a 4,500-year history of just putting hog manure on their farms. Take a look at how their soil has been mined of all the nutrients it needs to grow corn, soybeans, and that. If you're going to grow corn and the soybeans, they take nitrogen, they take potash, they take phosphate—you got to put it back. And that was their greatest need, and I think they have reached the point now where they are using more fertilizer, but you still can't mechanize to the extent that it would make their agriculture a lot more efficient. There's still a critical market force.

DePue: Have you been back to China in the last ten years or so?

Samuelson: Yeah. Since '78, I've been there ten times, and—

DePue: Talk to us about the difference that you've seen in agriculture in China, then.

Samuelson: It's a different country every time I go back. It changes. But the bigger changes are in the cities—Shanghai, for example. When I was there in '96 with Secretary Glickman on his trade mission, the mayor of Shanghai took us on a boat tour of the harbor, and she said 20 percent of all of the building cranes in the world were in Shanghai. And we stayed in a new hotel that was about fifty stories tall, and looking out the window, that's all you saw—building cranes. You saw all the little homes that were being torn down, and the building cranes. So the changes that I've seen every time I go back, you see more in the city than you do on the farm. You still don't see much mechanization on the farms.

DePue: Are they still collective farms?

Samuelson: They are. They are. And the other thing that makes them so difficult for big machinery—because we've got John Deere over there manufacturing, and we've got ADM over there with plants that are processing, and the farms are filled with ditches, either to irrigate or to take water away for drainage, and those ditches are big enough that you just don't roll combines or tractors over it. So they would have to restructure the farmland itself in many instances to bring in the kind of equipment that is commonplace on an American farm. And if they do that too quickly, then what do you do with all the laborers? Send them to the city, and the cities are growing so rapidly anyway that—it's got to be a tightrope for the Chinese government. It really does. And we hope they succeed, because (laughs) they're an important market.

DePue: And from everything we've heard recently, that I've been reading about the explosion in their economy and their incredible growth that they've had, that one of the results of that is they've developed a liking for meat.

Samuelson: Yes, they have, and we like that. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, I would think that hog farmers in the United States could see a tremendous growth in that particular market.

Samuelson: Yes, because they tend to eat more pork than beef, and of course, poultry is an important part of what they eat. My first trip over there, I was a guest of honor at one of the meals, and I ate the head of the chicken, (laughter) and I didn't eat the legs, but that's the thing that they do. On one of my trips over there, I was sitting in the people's hall at an agricultural event, and there was a gentleman from Washington State who was an entrepreneur. He was making a huge living selling chicken paws, because the feet and the leg of the chicken are a delicacy. Well, we throw it away. And he was shipping thousands of tons over to China and making a huge living doing that. It's interesting. In many parts of the world, items that we throw away, they like, and when you discover that, hey, that's great, because then we can make money off something that's been waste material before.

DePue: I'm at the point now where I'd like to change gears here again, and for the rest of our discussion—I think we've got lots to talk about—but to kind of go through some of the issues that are out there currently. And there's none bigger right now than this whole discussion about ethanol and fuel and the discussion about, well, is this fuel—

Samuelson: Food versus fuel.

DePue: Yeah, exactly. And I want to start with a quote here. And again, *Samuelson Sez* has been a wonderful source of information for me. This one is by Jim Rapp—and I'm sure you'll recognize this one—and his quote said in terms of this debate, "The rapid growth of the ethanol industry tells you all you need to know about its performance and viability. It burns cleaner, thus fighting air pollution—ask the American Lung Association. It's made here at home, providing jobs—just ask the 230,000 people already employed as a result of ethanol plant construction, operation-related support services. It provides more dollars into our local communities—just ask the local business owners about the increased dollars spent at their stores." Well, that gets us started into a very lively and a big debate. And I'll turn it over to you.

Samuelson: Food versus fuel last year was totally blown out of proportion, and I did a lot of *Samuelson Sez* on that and got a lot of e-mails and phone calls from people saying, "It's just not right to take food from hungry people and put it into the tanks of our gas-guzzling SUVs, and we need to stop that." We would respond by saying, we can produce the corn for the ethanol, and once we've taken the ethanol out of that bushel of corn, we still have a high-protein livestock feed in corn gluten. We still have the corn sweeter that is going into the soda pops and the other uses for sweetener in this country. And we don't throw that bushel of corn away, so we are not taking food out of the mouths of hungry people. And secondly, if there is a demand for more corn for ethanol, we can grow it. We have that capability in this country. We've got the technology. We have the genetic enhancement of various crops, and we can do it.

What was really irritating—nobody wanted to blame oil for the increase in food price. They were all critical of the ethanol and biodiesel situation, and I kept saying, "If you want to look at the real reason for the increase in food prices, look at oil—crude oil."

DePue: Well, let's put some markers—I'm sorry to interrupt—but let's put some markers for people out there who might be watching this quite a ways down the road. Let's talk about—I'll ask you about the price of oil going into this—where it started and where it peaked, and then where we're at today—and today again is February 2009—and then do the same thing for corn and soybeans. And I think you could also make an analogy for rice and wheat and other products. So.

Samuelson: Well, the peaks on the upside happened early in 2008 and continued into early summer of 2008, and then the valleys came in the last six months of 2008, and—

DePue: Where did we start with oil, though, at the beginning of this increase?

Samuelson: Oh, we were probably at about seventy-five or eighty dollars. I can remember when there was talk: Oh, my golly, if we go to seventy-five dollars, that's really serious. And then in July, it went to a hundred and forty-seven dollars. And there were a lot of analysts saying, "It's going to two hundred." And it prompted a lot of farmers to go into the futures market and buy the fuel they needed, whether it was diesel or gasoline, for what they do, because they were convinced that yeah, it is going to two hundred dollars a barrel. And I started to think that my rule of prices never go the same way forever would be broken by oil, because nobody could conceive that oil would go the other direction. And then starting after that hundred and forty-seven–dollar peak, it started down, and it went straight down, down to thirty-two dollars a barrel at one point. Now, that's bringing a projection about three weeks ago from an oil trader who says he thinks gasoline will be a dollar a gallon average in 2009. I don't think it will be. But this whole picture of going straight up—and it happened with corn, it happened with wheat, it happened with soybeans, cattle, hogs—all of the commodities.

And the thing we have to remember now in trading—because speculators got a lot of bad knocks in this whole thing—it was the speculators that were driving it up—and yeah, they were involved, but speculators also drive it down when it goes the other way. And speculators provide liquidity in the market because they'll take risks on the other side of a trend. If there weren't speculators, farmers couldn't go into the market and hedge their corn and hedge their wheat and soybeans, because there's got to be somebody there to take the other side of it. So we saw all of this happening, and then the bottom just dropped out of the market. Fertilizer prices, based on petroleum, you know, reached a thousand dollars a ton, and that drove farmers—Hey, we better lock it in, because if petroleum goes to two hundred, why, it'll be fifteen hundred dollars a ton. A lot of

them locked it in at that level, and then the bottom fell out of the fertilizer market.

DePue: Well, talk about the rise in especially corn and soybeans, if you could.

Samuelson: We saw corn—and you talked about perfect storm. The perfect storm that came about, really, was the sudden growth in agricultural products for fuel; the short crops in countries like Brazil that saw a smaller crop, Argentina, and Australia; and to some extent, we saw a smaller crop in this country. So you had a growth in demand, and you had a declining supply. It really was the law of supply and demand—and maybe the speculators did drive it beyond reality at a point there, because—and oil the same way. Because the other thing that happened that made it difficult for farmers' mutual funds or those funds that broaden their portfolio—when they look at stocks, they're looking at paper. And when you get into nervous times economically—wartime, particularly, people like to have something they can hold, whether it be gold, oil, soybeans, wheat, or whatever. And so they began bundling into the portfolio a commodity bundle, and it included oil and wheat and cattle and hogs all together, which then really tied agricultural products to the price of oil and to the price of the other metals and the commodities that came into the bundle. So that probably drove the speculative side as well. Growing demand in foreign markets. And all of this came together at one time.

DePue: So where did the corn and soybeans start two or three years ago?

Samuelson: Oh, we'd sell corn out of the field at $1.90 a bushel, and some down to $1.50, $1.40 a bushel. And soybeans, five dollars. When soybeans hit eight dollars for the first time, my golly, people couldn't believe it.

DePue: Where did those prices peak?

Samuelson: Well, corn, on the futures market, got close to eight dollars. Because of an unusual situation in wheat that occurred on the Minneapolis market during the peak of the wheat market last year, in early 2008, we saw wheat go up to twenty-four dollars a bushel. Normal price for wheat is four dollars, three dollars, somewhere in there. And it's now back to five dollars, $5.50 a bushel. Corn is back below four dollars a bushel after getting close to eight. Soybeans had got up in the fifteen, sixteen dollar a bushel range, now trading back at nine dollars, which, compared to two or three years ago is a very good price. But it isn't a good price when you've got fertilizer prices and fuel prices where they are.

DePue: And we've talked about that farmer out there gambling. He gambled that fuel prices would stay high?

Samuelson: Would go up. And so now he's paying, because he locked it in, so you got to pay it. And now diesel has come down, gasoline has come down. I would say the biggest challenge an American farmer has today and in the future is not how to produce, but how to market.

DePue: Yeah. This is a good place to stop, very briefly—have to take a break. And we're just getting into this whole ethanol—

(Pause in recording)

DePue: —and we've been talking about ethanol and the many sides of that debate. Food versus fuel is where we started. From your comments, I would guess that you don't buy the notion that peasants in India and in Mexico are starving because of us deciding to make ethanol in this country.

Samuelson: No, I don't think so at all. As a matter of fact, if we had the transportation system, I don't think we would have malnutrition on the planet, but the problem is, we can't get it to the people who need it, and the other problem we have is there are those countries like Ethiopia and North Korea whose leaders control the population by saying, If you're with me, you get food; if you're not, tough. So no, I don't think that ethanol or biodiesel has had really any impact on availability of food.

DePue: Okay. Another side of that ethanol debate has been on whether or not it's an efficient way to create fuel. I wonder if you can address your thoughts on that.

Samuelson: Well, the research that says it isn't goes back to the 1980s, a professor at Cornell University who came out with research saying that it took more energy to produce ethanol than the ethanol ultimately produced. Most scientists who have worked on the ethanol project or the alternative fuels project say it was faulty research, that the conclusion that was reached by this professor was faulty because of the way the research was conducted, that actually, ethanol does produce more energy. And unfortunately, the opponents of ethanol pulled that research out, and today, with the techniques that we have involved in production of ethanol, we are far more efficient, producing far more energy from ethanol than it takes to produce the ethanol. But—

DePue: The figures I've heard, and you can challenge these—this is your perfect opportunity to set the record straight—is that for one gallon of fuel inputs, you can get about 1.3 gallons of ethanol.

Samuelson: I think it's up to 1.5 or 1.6 with the new refining techniques. I know it's over 1.5. So that has changed. And then the other argument against ethanol is it uses so much water. There is an ethanol plant in the middle of the desert, southwest of Phoenix, Arizona, that I have visited, and they recycle all of the water, so once it has done what it does in production of ethanol, they turn it back into steam, and then they condense it, and they circulate the water back and forth, so you're not—and in the desert, you couldn't afford to use that much water.

DePue: Well, you can't possibly talk about ethanol production without talking about, well, why don't we produce more oil domestically, because we have the capability of doing that. Your reaction—(laughs) you're already smiling, Orion.

Samuelson: I don't know why we don't. I really don't know why. We got the first warning back in the seventies. At that time, we were importing, what, 35 to 40 percent of our energy in foreign oil; today, we're over 60 percent of our energy in imported oil. And back in that oil embargo of the seventies, we said, "That's it. We're going to find ways that we can cut our use of foreign oil." We've increased it. We've increased it dramatically. That's why I'm a strong advocate of biodiesel, a strong advocate of ethanol, because it does cut our dependence on foreign oil. It is grown on American farms, it is processed by American workers, and you don't have to haul it on a ship and take the risk of an Exxon Valdez in contaminating Mother Nature. To me, it just makes sense. If we have the ability to do it, and we have the mandate now that we have to be up to fifteen billion gallons of ethanol by the year 2015, and we can do that without taking food away from people.

DePue: Where are we at now?

Samuelson: We're at 10.6 billion as of 2008. But the first thing that can happen to the ethanol industry is for the price of oil to drop—and it's dropped. And so we have seen one major company file for bankruptcy, VeraSun, and they have about sixteen plants, and they've closed four of them. Just heard this week that a company in Wisconsin is going to close four of its nine ethanol plants, because price of oil is down, and so now we don't worry so much about the cost of foreign fuel and energy. And I'm afraid that we're going to go right back to where we did after the seventies and forget about it and say, Okay, why should we put all that money into countries that don't like us and probably use a lot of what we pay to foster terrorists instead of doing it here in this country? I just don't buy this whole argument that we ought not be doing this, because it has revitalized American agriculture. After President Bush mentioned ethanol in the State of the Union address in 2006, to me, that was a hallmark turning point in the acceptance of ethanol. The next day, we had Warren Buffet saying, "What is this?"; we had Bill Gates saying, "What is this?" And it brought ethanol to the forefront after thirty years of trying to get Congress to say, we can grow a lot more of our energy here.

DePue: But part of that revitalization was the upward movement of corn and soybean prices.

Samuelson: Correct.

DePue: Then you get back into that whole argument about food versus fuel.

Samuelson: I don't. (laughter) I don't think there is an argument. And what was really irritating, we had the American Bakers Association march on Capitol Hill February 27 of 2008 because wheat prices had gotten to the level where it was going to put the entire baking industry out of business. And they went to the White House, and they went to the secretary and said, "You've got to fix this, because we're going bankrupt." And they said, "The reason for that is because there is a shortage of wheat and because people are putting

corn into ethanol, they're using some wheat to feed livestock" and they came up with all the argument. But the entire reason they gave for raising bread prices was the price of wheat. Okay, wheat has come down about two-thirds, and if that's the only reason for the increase in bread prices, then why hasn't the price of bread come down two-thirds? Corn—in a $3.69 box of Corn Flakes, when corn was at almost eight dollars a bushel, the value of the corn in the box of Kellogg's Corn Flakes—eleven cents. Now, the price of corn is half—less than half—of what it was last fall, and so now the value of corn in that Kellogg's corn box is five cents. But I haven't seen the price of Corn Flakes drop. Milk—another example. The price of milk is 50 percent lower than it was last summer. I haven't seen the price of milk drop fifty cents. So the *Samuelson Sez* challenge that I shoot out at the food industry and the processors is, "If you're going to blame agriculture and the cost of the raw commodities solely for the reason you're increasing price, then when that price of the raw commodity comes down, then you should also say, We're going to lower the price to this level." And what was really irritating is the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the very people that depend on the producer for the raw material that they process, sell, and make a profit on, they spent millions of dollars fostering the food versus fuel, trying to convince voters that we should change the renewable food standard, that we should lower the figures on how much ethanol we need under the renewable fuel standard. And they spent millions of dollars. Finally, Deere and Monsanto and ADM and some other companies said, hey, we got to help farmers on this one, and so they put a lot of dollars into a campaign, basically fostered in Washington to hit the members of Congress. Wait a minute, this isn't right. So I don't see this food versus fuel thing as having any reality at all. (laughs)

DePue: Let me throw you a softball here, or at least I think it's a softball. (laughter) When those prices were sky-high for corn and soybeans and wheat, were the food manufacturers able to maintain any profitability?

Samuelson: Well, I did a *Samuelson Sez* on that in November of last year, and we looked at the earnings reports of Kellogg's and General Mills, and every food processing company we looked at—and I think there were six or seven—all showed an increase in profit, despite these higher ingredient costs that they were really moaning about. They all showed an increase in profit, and some of them were sizeable increases in profit in the third quarter of last year, when we were in the middle of all this.

DePue: So maybe they're even making more profit, now that—

Samuelson: Oh, they've got to, because they're not cutting the price. I haven't seen the box of Corn Flakes get any cheaper.

DePue: Let's go back to again the ethanol discussion. Part of the challenge in ethanol on whether not it's an efficient way of producing fuel is the whole—it gets us back to Brazil, and it gets us back to a more efficient

way of producing ethanol, at least that's the challenge, and that would be with sugarcane. Your reaction to that side of it?

Samuelson: Brazil has probably done a better job of converting the fuel needs in that country to ethanol—well, I would say has done a better job than any other county in the world. They use sugarcane, because they had—and again, part of this was surplus supplies: What are we going to do with this?

DePue: But part of that whole discussion is, well, what is it that creates ethanol? It's sugar, and obviously sugarcane has a much higher percentage than corn.

Samuelson: Right, and we don't do sugar in this country. First of all, we don't grow enough sugarcane to do it. But the farm bill of 2008 is putting in the biggest amount of research dollars in the alternative fuels program to come up with cellulosic, and we now have—

DePue: Switchgrass?

Samuelson: Switchgrass. Miscanthus, which is a crop that's being grown at the University of Illinois as a—it's a perennial, and it grows on poor land. But to do that, you have to generate an entire system, so it doesn't happen overnight, because you have to develop planting equipment, you have to develop harvesting equipment, you have to develop storage—how do you store this stuff, because you can't process it all at one time? And then the processing side of it is totally different than using corn as the product. But the band-aid in the 2008 farm bill is to move into cellulosic production of ethanol, and POET, which is the largest maker of ethanol in the country, has a plant—I think it's in South Dakota—that has been online now doing just cellulosic. And you can take trees, you know, and you can take plants that are grown specifically for it. So that's the direction. We will be moving away from corn, because farmers do react, and while they were irritated by the food versus fuel argument, they thought, Okay, we better find other ways so that we don't have to put up with this kind of stuff.

And we have seen it time and again. Back in the seventies, when people were so upset about using pesticides and insecticides—millions of tons on corn and soybeans and wheat to kill pests that would otherwise kill the crop. And people said, "We've got to quit using this stuff. It's poison. You've got to stop using it." Well, it wasn't poison, but farmers looked at that and said, Okay. They're going to come at us, and they're the boss. And so today, we have genetic modification—"enhancement," I call it—GMOs—genetically modified organisms—I call it genetically enhanced. That in the case of the European Corn Borer, which really destroys a lot of corn, they have inserted a gene into that corn plant, and the only thing it does is make that plant unpalatable to the moth that lays the eggs. So it doesn't affect the quality of the corn, the nutrients in the corn. No effect, other than it has cut down almost entirely the use of an insecticide to kill that moth before it lays its eggs. Potato Beetle—another prime example. Colorado Potato Beetle that would destroy potatoes if you didn't spray

them. Well, they altered a gene in the potato plant. Doesn't affect the production of potatoes, but if you go to Epcot in Florida, and the land display down there, you'll see a graphic demonstration—a clear acrylic case with two potato plants in pots down there. One has been altered genetically; the other one hasn't. And then they put Colorado Potato Beetles inside the case, and within two days, the unaltered plant is gone. The altered plant hasn't been touched.

So now we're getting argument—it drives farmers crazy. They don't know where to go. They don't want you to use insecticides? Okay, we have worked around that. Now they say, Oh, you can't fool with Mother Nature. You can't genetically modify these plants because who knows what that might do to us thirty years down the road. Well, they tell me when electricity came to rural America, (laughter) there will those who said it will sterilize the men, and it will sterilize bulls, and it'll give you all kinds of problems. Nobody knows what's down the road. But I come back to something that I say over and over: we have to maintain science as a benchmark. If we allow emotion to take over, then we're in big trouble, because science must be the benchmark. But it frustrates farmers, because what do you do? Now you've got the European Union saying, "Uh, we don't want any of this GMO stuff." Well, when you get a country like Zimbabwe, whose people are starving to death, and we ship them 25,000 tons of corn to help feed their people, and they say, "Well, it's genetically mod—" yeah, it is. "Oh, we can't eat that," so we let our people starve rather than take a chance that fifty years down the road, they'll be born with one eye or something. I don't know. (laughter) Now I'm emotional, and I should stay to science, but it's just so frustrating.

DePue: These are incredibly emotional issues, and—

Samuelson: They are.

DePue: —it's interesting—the last year and a half, suddenly food production has gotten to the forefront of our discussion about the news. It's just getting to that point.

Samuelson: It has, and maybe that, in the long run, will benefit agriculture.

DePue: Back to the ethanol issue and this whole debate about whether or not it's efficient. A lot of people, economists, would say—and people in a particular political stripe, perhaps—How can we say it's efficient when we subsidize by fifty-one cents per gallon in a tax credit, and then we block Brazilian ethanol to come in at a rate of fifty-four–cent tariff on it?

Samuelson: Right. I agree with that. I think we need to phase it out. Now, I understand why we did it. It's a new industry, and it takes a tremendous investment to build an ethanol plant. And I think that while the industry is relatively new—and really, it is the last five or six years, which is a new industry, and they're right now going through a very challenging time—I think you need to give them that protection. Now, if we were the only country with

trade protection, (laughter) then I would say no, but when you look what we're up against with other countries on many other products... But I editorialized late last year, saying, "It's time to begin phasing out the fifty-one cent a gallon and the fifty-four cent import tariff, that it's going to have to stand on its own." But I don't want to phase it out until we phase out all the subsidies for the oil industry, because we are competing with that industry, and you take a look at the subsidies that go into the oil industry every year.

DePue: Can you talk specifics on those?

Samuelson: I don't have them in front of me now, but I've done a *Samuelson Sez* on it, and the overall subsidy for the oil industry is much larger than the overall subsidy for the ethanol industry. I mean, we've done all sorts of things, and still, we can't get the oil companies to build refineries. But again, that comes back to environmental rules. We badly need refineries in this country, but where can you build one?

DePue: And I will certainly get to a more thorough discussion of environmental issues (laughter) because I know that's another one that's near and dear to your heart. You think about some of the debate we've had about fuel production, and a lot of it has been about offshore oil drilling and the comments, Well, it would take us five to ten years before that gets up to production in the first place, and I'm sure the oilmen would say, again, That's where we need the subsidies to support that.

Samuelson: And had we started doing that in 1974, (laughter) we'd be producing a lot of the petroleum that we need.

DePue: And now we're back to the environmental issue again.

Samuelson: (laughs) And now we're back to the environmental issue.

DePue: Okay, let's go to more discussion about the whole commodity price—and maybe we've talked about that quite a bit. Let's take a different look on that, in terms of some of the closed markets. Your reaction to places like Cuba, in particular, that's been a closed market for a long time.

Samuelson: It's been totally ridiculous to have the embargo since 1962. I went to Cuba in 1999, I think it was, when Governor Ryan of Illinois became the first governor to go to Cuba in forty years. And I was invited to go along, and went to Cuba. And talking to the Cuban people, they said, "Oh, we love that Texas long-grain rice. That was our favorite rice. Now we're getting rice from Vietnam, and we don't like it. We'd love to get that Texas long-grained rice back into the market." And I look at Cuba, ninety miles off our shore. They produce sugar and some fruits, but they don't produce much in the way of meat or milk. Matter of fact we went out to a dairy farm that was a commune farm, and talking to the manager there, he almost had tears in his eyes when he said, "I wish I could bring the Holstein genetics from the U.S.," because he said, "This herd was started half a century ago with genetics from the United States. Now," he said, "I

can't do it." And he said, "Not only that, but I can't import the grain to feed these animals to get top production out of them."

To me, embargoes never work, unless you are solely in control of whatever it is you're embargoing. But here was Cuba with every other country in the world trading with it. Cuba was getting its soybeans from Brazil, it was getting wheat from Canada, it was getting rice from Vietnam, it was getting poultry from France. It was getting everything it needed, and here we are, ninety miles away... On the airplane going down, I sat next to Alan Andreas of ADM, and I said, "How frustrating is it for you?" And he said, "Every day, we have ships coming out of the Gulf that go right by Cuba with everything they need, and we can't stop." And so I have hopes that under President Obama, we will open up. Under President Bush—and that was a political thing, I think, because the American Cuban population in Florida—

DePue: Yeah, that Cuban lobby in Florida.

Samuelson: That Cuban lobby. And you know, Mr. Bush needed Florida in the election, as did his brother, and so I think that was a good part of it. But he wouldn't even talk about it. And finally he was convinced that, okay, we can sell them food if there is no credit involved. If it's cash on the barrelhead, we can sell them food. And we have, since that happened earlier in this decade, we've I think sold 2.6 billion dollars' worth of food to Cuba. But they would buy more if credit weren't involved, and they'd certainly get that Texas long-grained rice that they really want in there. It just doesn't make sense. We imposed the embargo to get Castro out of there. He's still there.

DePue: Well, Raul's there, and perhaps—we've got a new administration; perhaps that new administration will change things, too.

Samuelson: There has been an indication that the dialogue will open. The other indication I've seen is we will not immediately lift the embargo. But you know, we embargoed wheat sales under Jimmy Carter to Russia because we were going to teach them a lesson on Afghanistan, and every country that produced wheat sold it.

DePue: Well, you had already talked about genetically modified—GMOs?

Samuelson: GMOs.

DePue: Is that Organisms?

Samuelson: Right.

DePue: A little bit. And again, you can't talk about that without talking about world markets. So let's talk about GMOs, and tell us a little bit about what we have been able to do, both in terms of plants and animals in that respect.

Samuelson: Well, Earl Butz, when he was secretary of agriculture, often said, "The worse thing than biting into an apple and finding a worm is to bite into an

apple and find half a worm." (laughter) Meaning the other half of it is in your mouth. And he said, "Without technology and the ability to destroy the bugs and the pests that will destroy the crop, or the plant disease that will destroy a crop, our food prices would be higher, and food quality would be far less." And I'm not going to get into an argument with organic farmers. I have no trouble with what they're doing, but I don't subscribe to the theory that total organic farming would produce enough food to feed the world and to feed us. That, I do not accept, and I don't think it's an argument they should use. But if people are willing to pay more—and I'm not one of them—but if people are, and that farmer gets more for what he produces, hey, more power to him. So it's a fast-growing segment of the market. It's a niche market, and fine, take advantage of it.

But again, we come back to technology that has enabled us to bring corn production up to an average of 154 bushels an acre in 2008, with many farmers producing over 200 bushels to the acre, and soybeans have lagged, I think, in production increase, but we're working on it. And then when I look at what Monsanto is getting ready to introduce, a drought-resistant corn, where again, they have altered genes—and anybody who's gone to the Farm Progress Show the past two years has had an opportunity to see the test plots, because they go in, and they plant the stuff, and then they hold water off a certain part of it, and the other part gets what would be a normal rainfall. And they're looking at the moment—and Rob Fraley at Monsanto says this is just the beginning—they're looking at a 15 percent increase in corn production in a drought because of what they have done to alter the plant to make it not only survive but thrive on less water. Well, think what that means to Africa. Think what that could mean to India, where if you have dry areas, you could plant this variety, and you could produce more.

And to me, this is just the beginning. As far as livestock, the embryo transplants—there was a time that if you brought breeding stock—if you bought heifers and bulls—you had to literally ship the animals to get the pedigree and the genetics. The early Cuban Holstein industry, that's what you do; you ship the animal. Now, you take a vial of embryos, you take a vial of semen, and semen from a bull that's been dead for twenty years, but you freeze it, and you maintain it, and you use it to artificially inseminate a cow, and it gives you the pedigree that says, This breeding produces more milk or produces better quality meat. The increase we have seen in nutrition in beef and pork and poultry has been phenomenal. We have gotten about as close as you can get to getting a pound of poultry meat for a pound of feed. They're working toward that. And again, it's all science. And the emotion that says, Oh, we can't eat that. It might hurt us.

DePue: The public seems to get a little bit more nervous, though, when you talk about genetic modifications in animals, where you take—

Samuelson: Yes.

DePue: —some trait from one animal, and you splice it into another one.

Samuelson: Yeah, definitely, because then the next step is a human, and I think that's why there is emotional opposition. And I understand that if—

DePue: That would be an ethical boundary you would not be in favor of crossing?

Samuelson: Livestock, I'd have no problem. Humans, I'd have a real problem. I really would. But—

DePue: But it's currently not going on for livestock, is that correct?

Samuelson: It is, experimentally. Cloning is a prime example. And several—

DePue: But only experimentally?

Samuelson: Experimentally. But the USDA and the FDA have said that milk from cloned cows is safe, and so the approval is there from a safety standpoint, but from an emotional standpoint, I don't think it is. Several years ago at World Ag Expo, there was a company there that had cloned twelve dairy calves. And it was absolutely fascinating. Every calf looked exactly like the next one. I mean, there was no difference in appearance at all. And every calf, when it reached production age, was producing the same level of high-quality milk. And we've seen the cloned pony, and we've seen the cloned sheep. Now we're seeing cloned dogs. And the ability, apparently, to take DNA from your pet and create a new one... (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, it just hit the news. I think some woman paid 140,000 dollars to clone her beloved dog.

Samuelson: Her beloved dog, yes. But the scary thing there for a lot of people is that okay, now they're going to do it with humans. And there could be a scientific reason to do it. If your family has a cancer trait, maybe you alter some of your genes and it'll remove the cancer trait. We don't know yet, but I'm sure somebody out there is looking at it and talking about it.

DePue: Yeah, I'm sure our society will get into that lively debate here in the next few years.

Samuelson: And it will be lively—very much so. And I think it'll take some time to make any serious change in the thinking on that.

DePue: One of the things you hear in terms of criticism about everything that's happening is—in the seed side, for example—is that we're going to get to the point where we have only a small number of seeds, and if, God forbid, something should happen—a new organism hits that wipes out entire crops across the world. Your concerns on that?

Samuelson: I remember several years ago when we had a corn disease—oh, this is probably twenty years ago—we had a corn disease rust that hit, and the initial reaction was, Oh my God, this is going to destroy the corn crop. By the end of that crop year, we had crop varieties that we'd grown in Hawaii and in Argentina and brought the seed back here that took it totally out of the problem. It was a one-year problem. Sent corn prices higher because

we were not going to be able to grow corn. It was a corn blight. And we came up with genetic changes, and we heard about it one year, and it was gone. Asian rust in soybeans that has come up here from Brazil, carried in here on the winds. A couple of years ago, there was a major concern that this was going to take over the soybean crop. Some of the chemical companies produced a tremendous amount of anti-rust chemical in preparation—and it never happened. We maybe get two or three cases reported a year, and it just has never happened. Just like—(laughs) I'll probably regret this as I lie on my bed, dying of bird flu—(laughs) but I think bird flu is not the concern that it should be. I really don't. We're spending billions of dollars to avoid the pandemic, and last I saw, it was like 215 people have died on the planet from bird flu, and that's people who kiss chickens on the mouth and stuff like that, so. (laughter)

DePue: Well, since we're in the neighborhood, "the cow that killed Christmas."

Samuelson: Oh, yeah. Well, it started with a cow in Alberta, Canada. That was the first discovery in this country—

DePue: Of...?

Samuelson: —of BSE—Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis, I think is the correct terminology for it. It had ravaged the herds in England.

DePue: And what's it otherwise known as? We should get that out.

Samuelson: Mad cow disease. Yeah, mad cow disease. And it is a disease that destroys the nervous system, and we had the video that's been played over and over and over again that we found not being able to stand and falling down and that sort of thing, because that's what it does. And then the concern is that it is transmissible to humans if you eat the meat, and it develops Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in humans. I have yet to have a medical person tell me with 100 percent assurance that it is transferable. Some have said, "Yeah, we're 80 percent sure," but I have not gotten a 100 percent sure from anybody. And while I have heard from listeners who said, "I had a cousin who lived in England, came to this country, and died of mad cow disease," I always respond by saying, "Can you send me a copy of the death certificate? I'd like to see what they put." And generally, that's the end of it, but a couple did, and cause of death was not listed as mad cow–induced.

But I've said many times that the biggest non-story I've had to cover is the mad cow story, because the day that that cow in Canada was discovered, the next day, cattle futures down the limit; stock in Burger King, McDonalds, and other beef companies, sharply lower, because nobody was every going to eat beef again. Nobody would ever dare to eat it, and so the beef—it's the end of the beef world.

DePue: Well, to a certain extent—correct me if I'm wrong here—that caused an immediate reaction in places like Japan and South Korea, did it not?

Samuelson: Countries closed the border all over, and to this day, they're not fully reopened, because in Japan—and they were our biggest beef buyer before this happened—and today, they will accept beef from animals twenty-one months or younger.

DePue: From the United States market.

Samuelson: From the United States. South Korea, they're up to thirty months of age or younger. But there really is no reason to shut off the export market anymore. Canada has probably discovered another dozen cases; in this country, I think we have maybe found two or three. That comes back to the National Animal Identification System that we ought to have so that we know where these animals are and where they have been. But England, that was hit hardest by mad cow disease, and it literally destroyed their beef industry for a while. And then, of course, foot-and-mouth disease—that was just horrible over there. We haven't had an outbreak of that since 1929 in this country, and that's why it's critical that we do everything we can to keep it out. But I think it's around 260 people that have died in England from Creutzfeldt-Jakob, and so some people say that's from eating mad cow beef. Others say, No, it's not. To me, it's a non-story.

DePue: If I understand—maybe this is a cultural thing, that in South Korea, at least, and maybe the same is true in Japan, that in some cases, the diet includes the beef brain.

Samuelson: True. But you know, the spinal column and the brain is also a part of the Mexican diet, but we have no restrictions on exporting beef to Mexico. A lot of it is protecting the domestic beef industry.

DePue: (laughs) I'm shocked. And I think some of the restrictions are they will accept our beef if it includes none of the spinal column.

Samuelson: Right, and when we finally opened the South Korean market, it was open for two months, and a shipment shows up over there with part of the spinal column in it. I'm not sure it was in it when it left here; it may have suddenly appeared when it got to Korea, because their cattle producers were just adamant that they not accept our—it almost brought the government down last fall, because the head of the government, the president of South Korea, said, "All science says there is nothing wrong with this." And there were demonstrations that went on for a week, and there was revolt against him in the parliament, and it almost brought the government down until he said, "Okay, we'll back away." So we finally have started shipping beef in small amounts, and basically, it's the muscle cuts—which is the other point to make. Mad cow disease is not found in the muscle cuts, which is where you get your steaks. It's found in the ground beef and in the spinal column and there. But we have finally started to get some of the high-end beef back into South Korea, but it's an unbelievable negotiation.

DePue: Yeah, and there was another market where they're increasing taste for meat and meat products.

Samuelson: Oh yeah, yeah, very much so.

DePue: You've talked about this a couple of times, but I want to talk a bit in a little bit more length, the incredibly emotional issue of tracing animals. And I want you to explain first of all, why that's important. What's the dynamic that causes that to come into play?

Samuelson: Well, we just talked about mad cow disease, and—

DePue: I guess I'm talking about why is it an issue in the first place, and that these animals move around from place to place?

Samuelson: They do move around from place to place. And we have COOL at the moment—Country of Origin Labeling. Well, it's not unusual for an animal to be born on this side of the border, and then moved into Canada for feeding out, and then brought back here for slaughter, and so how do you label that animal? Is it U.S., or is it Canadian? And that's a separate issue. But on the National Animal ID issue, basically it's the feeling on the part of farmers, who don't trust government people very much, and they just think that—first of all, you have to register your location. And this now is a voluntary procedure, and I think maybe half of the animal producers in the United States have registered their location. We then look at a rancher who says, "Oh, well, okay, they know what I'm doing, they know what I've got; they can use it to check against my tax returns. And why should government have to know exactly how many animals I have here, anyway? It's none of their business; I'm a free-enterprise producer." So a lot of it is the Big Brother mentality: Washington is watching us for reasons other than traceability.

DePue: Is there a profitability aspect to the argument, that it costs more to be able to track these animals?

Samuelson: Yeah, and that's another concern. Who's going to pay for it? Is the federal government going to pay for the tracking? Is the rancher or farmer going to pay for the tracking? Is the consumer going to pay, because it'll be a safety factor for them in case there's an outbreak of something. And so in the minds of a lot of those who oppose it, there is this emotional factor that will affect them. There is also a financial fact—who's going to pay for it? That question gets asked a lot. And then the other thing is under—they initially tried to do it as mandatory and found out that that wasn't going to work, because it would involve horses, it would involve all animals, and that meant if a family had a 4-H kid with two steers, they'd have to register, and those steers would have to be identified. And if you had horses, they would have to be—you know, maybe you have pleasure horses, two of them, in a suburb that allows horses. You'd have to register your premises, and you'd have to have those horses identified. And then there's the tracking system, and there are several companies that are ready

to jump in because they see a real opportunity to make money, which there would be, because 60 million hogs, 100 million cattle, plus all of the other animals that you had.

It would be a complicated procedure, but once in place—I think as I mentioned earlier, farmers who produce beans or carrots for Gerber baby food, they have to keep track of every acre. They have it plotted out on a map that Gerbers has and they have, and whatever they do on that acre: the day they put fertilizer on, the day they put any crop protection on, and the day they plant the crop, and the day they harvest the crop. That all has to be totally recorded by the producer. In the event that there's a recall of Gerber baby food, they know exactly where to go. They can go right to the farm. And livestock people are pretty independent people, and they don't like it.

DePue: Maybe that's part of their genetic code, eh?

Samuelson: I think it is. I think it is. A lot of them just have a problem. And I have e-mails that will let you know how they feel. Because I say I think it's necessary, because I think it benefits the industry. When we had the tomato recall last year, it shut down the whole industry, and had we known and been able to trace where those tomatoes came from, you could have shut down that farm or that processing plant, and the rest of the industry could have then moved forward, but it took three weeks to find the source of it, and it turned out to be Mexico.

DePue: And devastated a lot of the producers.

Samuelson: Oh, devastated them, because you can't keep a tomato. When it's ripe, you harvest, and if nobody's eating tomatoes... And you know, everybody that used tomatoes in food processing, particularly the Mexican community and all that they do, they just stopped buying them. Didn't want to take a chance. The peanut thing that's just now coming to a conclusion—it's taken a long time.

DePue: How much of this whole discussion about tracing both plants and animals and the production—what's linked with foreign markets as well?

Samuelson: Well, some people see it as a benefit for our exports. For example, if we could tell a Japanese meat buyer, "We know exactly where this meat came from, so that if you are concerned, we can show you what it was fed and everything." And there are ranchers that are doing that, and there are some markets, I think, in Oklahoma and Kansas where they have markets just for fully traceable, identified animals. Foreign buyers, in some cases, are willing to pay more for that beef—and are willing to buy it, where if it's not identified, they probably wouldn't buy it and certainly wouldn't pay more. But there's not enough financial increase yet to get a lot of producers, I think, excited about it.

DePue: Part of the problems in marketing GMO foods has been in Europe. Do you see that changing?

Samuelson: Not as long as Greenpeace is active. That's basically a Greenpeace project. There was a recent action taken by the agricultural ministers in the European Union saying they would allow some more GMO corn to come into Europe, and then it moved to the higher level in the official pecking order, and they said, "No, we're not ready yet." And it's basically because of consumers. But farmers are getting more upset all the time because it's hampering their production. They can't use the genetics for the European corn borer, for example, and they can't use some of the technology we have, and they feel it puts them at a disadvantage in the world market—and they're right.

DePue: How about the challenges that presents to American producers, especially the grain, where you've got one field that doesn't have GMO grain, and the next field that does, and then, well, wind and nature takes its course?

Samuelson: It depends on what the technology is. Yeah, there is some technology. As a matter of fact, the Monsanto research that they've displayed at the Farm Progress Show. They have to be very careful about that, and they put it in an area where the wind can't affect it and that sort of thing, until they get it approved by USDA.

DePue: I'm trying to—my memory is failing me here, but wasn't there an incident just a couple years ago where there was a big question that it was supposed to be non-GMO grain, and they found traces where it was?

Samuelson: Japan. It was a load that we shipped to Japan. And yeah, it was a shipment of corn, and they discovered that it had some GMO in it, and so they rejected it.

DePue: And we're probably not talking about a couple thousand bushels of grain, are we?

Samuelson: No, we're not. We're talking about a boatload. We're talking about several thousand tons. And I'm not sure if that was brought back here and fed to livestock or if it was dumped. I don't know.

DePue: Let's talk about the role that the Extension Services and things like the Soybean Checkoff and others have in making these products more marketable, and finding other ways they can be used, as well.

Samuelson: Extension Service would not be involved in that, but the commodity organizations would be, and I think there are probably fifty or sixty commodities in this country now that have checkoff programs.

DePue: Well, first of all, explain how the checkoff programs work.

Samuelson: Depends on, if you're looking at a soybean checkoff, the percentage of money that goes to the United Soybean Board is based on the price. So if soybeans are fifteen dollars, you're going to get a lot more money into the United Soybean Board than when they're eight dollars, because—

DePue: Is that a federal agency?

Samuelson: No, no. This is a farmer agency. The way it works, corn growers, soybean growers, dairy farmers, beef producers, pork producers, almond producers, various commodities, the growers get together and say, "We need to do something to help us research and promote and advertise our product." So they put together a plan for a check-off program, and they then submit that to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They'll make revisions, it will come back to the organization—well, let me take National Cattlemen's Beef Association, because that convention just ended, and they did take some action there to increase the checkoff. So we'll take that one. So it comes back to the Cattlemen's Beef Board, and they say, Okay, we can accept this change; let's talk about this one. Finally, they come up with a checkoff program. In the case of the cattle industry, every time an animal is sold, a dollar is collected by the buyer and shipped to the Cattlemen's Beef Board to promote beef. So they have put that together, and then it goes to all of the producers in a referendum, and the producers will vote yes or no. And if enough of them vote yes, then it becomes reality, and then you begin checking off a dollar a head. Well, with inflation over the years, they now think they need two dollars a head, so this recommendation out of this last meeting in Phoenix a week ago—we'll go to Washington, saying we'd like to increase to two dollars a head. The USDA will look at it and say, "Okay, that's fine with us," and then it again goes to a referendum. So it's a rather complicated procedure to get it set up.

Now, once you get the funds coming in, then you use it on research to include the quality of the meat. There's a program that checkoff dollars fund called Beef Quality Assurance Program that works with producers to make sure that the animals are treated humanely and that their vaccinations take place in a way that's not going to destroy any of the meat in the animal carcass or the hide and that sort of thing. And then you've got the promotion. They work with the food service industry to get them to use more beef cuts in schools and hospitals and in restaurants. They work with the retailers of meat to come up with new cuts. And one of the important things they've done over the last five years is they have developed probably between ten and fifteen new cuts from lesser-quality parts of the animal. Flatiron steak is a good example. That comes from a part of the animal that was not really all that tender, but with breeding work and with production work, it is tender, and it sells very well. It comes up with the "Beef—it's what's for dinner." Pork industry came up with "the other white meat"—one of the most recognized taglines in advertising history. The milk industry—"Got milk?" and the milk mustache and all of that. All of that comes out of checkoff dollars. There is no government money involved; it is just producer money. And it has dramatically changed the consumption and the use of the various products.

And in the beef industry, when the Canada situation hit with mad cow disease—and the Canadian beef industry was really hit hard—the American beef industry watched that one very carefully and saw what was

right and what was wrong, and when we found "the cow that killed Christmas," the impact probably lasted two weeks. We were prepared. Checkoff dollars were in place to immediately get out to media and to get to the consumer, saying, "This is not a problem. The meat never entered the food system." And we did not see cattle limit down. We did not see stock in Tyson's and McDonalds fall sharply. So those checkoff dollars I think proved that had the producers not been involved, it probably wouldn't have been done.

DePue: Well, a big part of it—you've already talked about the importance that they have in terms of the research, and I guess my confusion with whether or not this was a federal program was—am I correct to say that a lot of times, their research sites are collocated with these land-grant colleges?

Samuelson: Oh yes. Yeah, they worked with the land-grant colleges, because the Cattlemen's Beef Board is not a research body. No, they have to contract with land-grant universities, or, in some cases, commercial research laboratories, and they'll work hand-in-hand with them. You'll find that in the dairy industry and in the pork industry, where the research is done, in many cases, by land grants, but there are times it's done by research firms that are simply in business to do that.

DePue: I must admit a fascination with soybeans and how, you know, sixty, seventy, eighty years ago, who was growing soybeans? And part of my fascination is all the different ways now they've found that soybeans is not only this incredibly productive plant to be grown in places like Iowa and Illinois, but all the different uses you have that nobody dreamed about. How much was that a factor of the soybean checkoff program?

Samuelson: Most of it. The soybean checkoff program does two things: develops foreign markets—with offices in various parts of the world. And so the development of export markets is an important part of the beef checkoff, the pork checkoff, soybeans, corn, you name it. And then the other important part is to find new uses. And when you take a look at soybeans. Well, Henry Ford brought them over here to put into his glass—his automobile glass—to make it safer. So Henry Ford gets a lot of credit for bringing soybeans to this country.

DePue: And who would have known that side of the story?

Samuelson: Right. Yeah. And he used it to make the glass laminate, so if there was an accident, the windows would shatter, but they wouldn't cut. So the soybean originally was used for that, and then when you crush the soybean, you get oil, which initially would go into paint and industrial products, and the meal would go to feed livestock. Well, then the soybean checkoff came up with first of all, the hydrogenated soybean oil, which makes it much more palatable to humans, and it gets a lot of use now in cooking. Soybean ink that doesn't come off the newspaper—when they were using regular, petroleum-based ink. I would say 80 percent of the newspapers in this country are printed on soybean ink. You've got the

soybean snack foods that came out of the research, and on and on. You've got an adhesive that is used in house construction, to glue wood together, that is better than anything that was on the market. And you've got soybean candles that have developed a big—and it just goes on and on. And they're continuing to look for new products.

DePue: Yeah, that's amazing development.

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: This is probably a good place to stop. We still have plenty more to talk about, but we'll pick it up in just a couple minutes.

Samuelson: Okay.

(End of interview #3)

Interview with Orion Samuelson

Interview #4: February 3, 2009
Interviewer Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

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DePue: We're back with Orion Samuelson. Orion, I think I'd like to change gears, and I know you're going to have some opinions about this subject area. I'm putting it under the big rubric of pollution, environment, and agriculture. Let's start with a quote. And again, your "Samuelson Sez"

articles have been just wonderful for this. Here's one from May of 2008. "For the past sixty years"—and this is somebody else you're quoting—"For the past sixty years, animal agriculture has been devastating our country's vital natural resources, including soil, water, and wildlife habitats." Well, that's a good start. "It has been generating more greenhouse gases than transportation. It has been elevating the risk of chronic disease that accounts for 130 million deaths annually. It has been abusing billions of innocent animals. And then for the final line, you quoted, "The only long-term solution to this tragedy is to gradually reduce the consumption of animal products to zero."

Samuelson: Who's the quote from?

DePue: Oh, gosh. Now you're going to put me on the spot here. You're quoting somebody else—the *Minneapolis Star Newspaper*.

Samuelson: Oh, that's right. I remember that story, yeah, that was written by a lover of PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. In agriculture, we call PETA People for the Tasty Eating of Animals. (laughter)

DePue: Just to rub it in their face?

Samuelson: Yeah. They irritate me. They just irritate me a lot, because they're—you talk about sound science, it disappears totally. Their arguments are all emotional.

DePue: Well, let's start with the argument about greenhouse gases.

Samuelson: I'm not enough of a scientist to know, but you know, I'm still bothered by global climate change and warming. Yeah, I'm sure there's some change, but I don't know that it's as serious as a lot of people are saying. And the reason I say that—we're measuring the current global warming based on a hundred years or 200 years. That's minuscule in the history of the planet. Thirty thousand years ago, the Ice Age in North America started. Twenty thousand years ago, it was at its peak. And ten thousand years ago, it was gone. So that's a thirty thousand–year period that we're measuring a weather trend; now we're trying to do it in 200 years. And I just find it strange that that beloved cow gets blamed for greenhouse gases that amount to more than transportation. I don't buy it.

DePue: We need to be explicit in here, and there's no—

Samuelson: Flatulence!

DePue: There you go.

Samuelson: Methane. We're now turning methane from livestock into power. We have farms that now take the methane, and we have methane digesters on dairy farms, and I think we're going to see more of them, and it takes that livestock waste material and turns it into energy that is another means, hopefully, of depending less on foreign energy. But I'm not a scientist, and I suppose here, I act emotionally. We've had animals on this planet forever, and why are they now suddenly being blamed for all the ills of the

planet and the environment and global warming and greenhouse gases, and particularly, those flatulence and burping and belching claims that are destroying the atmosphere.

DePue: I've got to ask you, and maybe this is a peculiar question to ask, but what would your father say about this particular argument?

Samuelson: (laughs) I think my father would just shake his head. I don't think he'd even laugh—he didn't have much of a sense of humor. I don't think he'd laugh, but he'd just shake his head and say, "Who are these people? What are they trying to do?" Well, I suppose we're trying to eliminate all animals from the planet, is what it looks like, and I'm not sure that's a good balance. Because if you look at the goals of PETA, they want to end animal agriculture. No more rodeos, no more zoos, no more anything that they in their definition say treats animals inhumanely. Well, if you're going to do that, and then you turn everybody into vegetarians, and they say that would be easier on the planet, but what do you do then with a million acres of grass that only a ruminant animal can turn into an edible food? Humans can't eat the grass, and the animals that do consume and do use it would be gone if they have their way. I don't buy that. I think everything is here for a reason.

DePue: Well, I assume that they are okay with wild animals who are living on their own, living in nature.

Samuelson: But domestic animals, they, I don't think, are. And so I've always—(laughs) when I chide the PETA people, I always say, "Hey, if you have a dog, turn it loose. God never intended a German Shepherd to live on the thirty-fourth floor of a high-rise in Chicago. If you have a cat, turn it loose, because God never intended it should live in the house." I mean, if you're going to carry it that far, then I'll get just as emotional and carry it that way, too.

DePue: Do you have PETA members, supporters, who listen to your program?

Samuelson: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. I hear from them. (laughs)

DePue: And what's the essence of the comments you hear from them?

Samuelson: Well, that I'm being totally unreasonable, that dogs and cats don't add to the greenhouse gases, and they don't get treated poorly, and that—and of course, I come back and say, "When God put dogs here, he probably didn't intend that they should live indoors." On the farm, our dog never came in the house. The dog always was outside, living in the barn or wherever. It gets so out of context. I remember a letter exchange that I had with a PETA person up in Wisconsin many years ago who had written to me, saying that we had to do away with what they call "factory farms." To me, a factory has an assembly line with workers on the assembly line, so I don't think a farm is a factory. The letter-writer said, "This is terrible. It's inhumane. You shouldn't confine animals that way, and they should be out under blue sky and walking on green grass." And then that winter, I

got a letter from another person saying, "I just drove up for a ski weekend in Wisconsin, and I drove by this farm, and they had those animals outside in the snow and the cold weather. You got to get those people to put those animals indoors." So I used the two letters. (laughter)

DePue: You're not going to win, though.

Samuelson: No, you're not going to win.

DePue: And to a certain extent, the camel's nose is in the tent, because there's talk right now—since EPA has declared that carbon dioxide is a pollutant, then there is now a discussion about taxing animal emissions.

Samuelson: Yes. Some unbelievable numbers. And again, all of these moves have the tendency to bring an end to this kind of production. And for those of us who want to keep eating meat and drinking milk, that means that if we make it tough enough for farmers in this country to produce, economically, it won't make sense, and they'll just say, "Hey, that's it. I've had it."

DePue: Where is the tax that they propose supposed to be levied in this process?

Samuelson: It would be levied every year. It would be an annual tax levied on the farm or the ranch, and I think the figures I saw, something like seventy-five dollars for a dairy animal or a beef animal. Well, if you had a thousand animals, multiply seventy-five dollars every year—why feed animals? Because that probably would be your profit in a normal market. Now, I've not heard anybody say, "Well, we're serious about that," but the fact that somebody has come up with the numbers says that yes, there is the discussion, and that we may have to go this way. It was talked about at the Cattleman's Convention, and they said it would probably put 30 percent of the cattle people out of business. They couldn't afford it.

DePue: Would it drive some of the market overseas, so that—

Samuelson: Oh, if we want to eat beef, absolutely. We'd import it from Australia, and we would import it from South America, where we have no control over how the animal is cared for, how the animal is fed. That's why I keep saying to consumers who pass laws like they did in California, where now within the next five years, poultry producers, hog producers—not that there are that many in California, but egg producers there are—and they've got five years to totally change the building and the structure and the setup, and the cost will be prohibitive.

DePue: Can you talk about that in some more detail here? I think you're referring to Proposition Two, so it's not just a matter of law, it's a matter of the entire population of California voted for this, right?

Samuelson: Mm-hmm, right. And again, because they played to the emotion of people. So what will probably happen to the consumers of California is their egg supply will leave the state, and it will be produced elsewhere, which means that their eggs will cost more, and the freshness won't be there the

way it is when it's produced in California. That's more than likely going to be the happening.

DePue: What's the goal, then, for those who are advocating for things like Proposition Two? What do you see the long-term goals that they have?

Samuelson: A lot of it is to get rid of animal agriculture. I keep coming back to that, that there are very strong movements in the Humane Society of the United States and in the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals. And they want to eliminate animal agriculture. They want you and me eating cereals.

DePue: What would be their strategy for doing that? Not just California, but I would assume they want to extend that to other states?

Samuelson: Well, and it's fully expected—there's a saying in agriculture that a rule that's made in California eventually will make its way across the country. And two or three years ago, there were propositions in Florida and Arizona that dictated the size of crates for sows in gestation that would again totally—these rules are made by people who have never fed a chicken or have never fed a hog. They don't know about the treatment that's there now. The dairy cows and the dairy calves that I see on farms today are treated so much better than they were on the farm when I grew up, because the facilities are better, the ability to keep the pens and the animals clean is far greater than when I was growing up. And we have done a lot to improve the quality of life. Now, keep in mind, ultimately the animal will be slaughtered. That's part of what broiler chickens and hogs and cattle are all about. So it's again a frustrating issue. But if we make the rules tough enough and expensive enough, then we'll look to other countries for our food supply—and that bothers me.

DePue: Is there a trend in the American population towards more and more vegetarians, to a less consumption of meat?

Samuelson: I don't know. Probably there is more, because I think some of the campaigns of PETA do work. They have a great way of getting attention. And even though most of it is emotional, without a lot of fact behind it. So yeah, there probably is that trend because of the emotional argument.

DePue: I had an opportunity to interview Doug Parrott, who is a professor at the University of Illinois in animal sciences. He made the comment that Americans don't know where their food is coming from, and we got to that comment because he was using the word "harvest" instead of "slaughtering" and "butchering." Your reaction to that trend?

Samuelson: Well, I think it has to be done because of the emotional reaction or response you get to the word "slaughtering." So we harvest corn, we harvest soybeans, we harvest cattle, we harvest hogs. And that's fine with me to use that terminology. No problem.

DePue: NIMBY—not in my backyard, and how that plays out in agricultural communities.

Samuelson: It plays out in the building of ethanol plants. It plays out in the building of wind farms. It plays out in so many areas. I guess probably my Samuelson Sez on this issue deals more with energy, because in the community where I grew up, a company is trying to put in a wind farm and put wind turbines in, and that area is relatively poor economy-wise, from an agricultural—it's hilly, and you know, no big farming operations there, and it's not a financially strong community. Well, a wind farm would allow at least an additional two to 3,000 dollars a year to the farmer where that turbine is placed. But two families from Chicago moved up there in retirement to have their retirement home up there on one of the hills or in one of the valleys, and immediately, "We don't want that wind farm spoiling our view, and turbines are dangerous. In the wintertime, they'll get ice on the blades, and the ice will come flying off and kill people. And there's a strobe light effect that will affect people mentally. And it'll kill birds," and all of these emotional arguments that have not proven true in any of the wind farms that have been constructed across the country. And so it comes back—we all want clean energy, we all want cheap energy, but not in my backyard. And it's been in litigation for three years, and I think the company is about ready to give up. And it has split the community, it has split families, because it would be an income producer for a lot of farmers, but others have been enthralled by the two families from Chicago and say, "Ah, they're right. Man, that wouldn't look good with a tower up there on the hill." And so I think that they'll probably just give up and walk away.

It's already happened on another proposed wind farm north of Milwaukee, where again, the opposition was, "No, no, we don't want it there." Well, look at Cape Cod. They want to put it out in the water at Cape Cod, and the Kennedy's say, "Whoa, no, it'll spoil our view of the ocean." Well, then we continue to buy oil from the Middle East.

An ethanol plant in Wisconsin, again—the challenge here is retired people move out from the city, and they don't want anything to change. They don't have to make a living in the community because they've got their retirement fund. But the people who live there—Clinton, Wisconsin, just north of the Illinois border. They tried to put an ethanol plant in there. Some retired professors from the University of Wisconsin had moved out there. "No, we don't want an ethanol plant here. It'll put pollutants in the air," and organized the community and fought it, and the plant was never built. In light of the economy now, maybe that was a good move. But—

DePue: Well, another one to get even closer to agriculture is hog confinement facilities. That's a hot-button subject any time one is proposed, and a major expansion of a hog operation in the country, and in Illinois, for example.

Samuelson: And dairy in Illinois. We have a big fight going on in Jo Daviess County, Illinois—a dairyman who wants to build a 4,500-cow facility there and has been fought every step of the way, mainly by non-farmers, but even some farmers who are saying, "Hey, we don't want that." And I don't

understand, because they do provide a good market for farmers who grow hay, corn, oats, soybeans, because they have to feed those animals. The dairyman who's trying to do that is a very successful dairyman with operations in California and in Oregon and has a good record of running a good dairy farm operation. And probably would question his wisdom in trying to build this in an area where a lot of Chicago people have moved out to summer homes. Probably should have gone downstate somewhere, far away from any kind of retirement community and any kind of an urban community, and tried to do it there. So he's still fighting it, and fighting it in the courts, and he may win. Last I heard, some of the farmers have come around, but the non-farmers are saying no.

DePue: What's your comment, though, when it goes beyond the aesthetic arguments? It's just, "We're out here; we want to retire. We don't want these things around us to"—issues like water quality and how you manage that massive amount of manure that's being produced?

Samuelson: Well, we have a relatively new livestock siting law in Illinois that deals with this issue and sets up the parameters on how, and the facility you build to handle the manure and the procedures you use. And farmers understand that. They want to be good neighbors. And in many cases, they're there long before the non-farmers decide they want a five-acre plot with a home on it. And I fault a lot of realtors who entice city people to go out to the country, not explaining to them that they're going to smell things they've never smelled before, and they're going to hear noises they've never heard before, and that the electricity could go out during a thunderstorm, and there's not weekly garbage pickup, and all that. And I really think that realtors who sell home sites to people from the city should do a far better job of saying, "Okay, there's a dairy farm about three miles from you; there's a hog farm about two miles from you, and they have certain rights on what they're going to do with their livestock operations." And the industry itself really has to continue—and here we come to checkoff dollars in the pork industry. A lot of check-off dollars are being spent on odor control, and we're making headway on it, where we're able to really reduce odors. Because on a hot summer day, a hog farm can have an odor that you really don't want—and I understand you don't want to live next to that. But if you knew before you got there that this was there, then maybe you would tend to locate your home somewhere else. But farmers want to be good neighbors, and they work very hard.

I remember years ago when you'd move into a community, and there'd be a welcome wagon. And you know, they'd come out, and they'd give you certificates from stores and tell you where the post office is and the hospital and all that. And I suggest to country farm bureaus they ought to have a welcome wagon in the country, and instead of shunning a city neighbor who moves out there, be there at the door with an apple pie the day they arrive and they move in and explain to them what's going to be happening around them, because if you get them to understand right away,

then they can become advocates, but if you just turn your back on them, then they feel unwanted, and pretty soon, they're filing lawsuits saying, "You know, you can't do that here." Yeah, this whole NIMBY thing is a problem. It really is.

DePue: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the dynamics of how these decisions are made for approval of some of these things like an ethanol plant or a hog confinement facility or this dairy operation. And the dynamic is whether or not these decisions are centralized, say, at the state level, versus at the county or even more locally—how that plays out.

Samuelson: Well, the Illinois law is a state law, designed to keep it uniform all across the state. And Iowa did a similar law, but they ran into a real hornets' nest from counties who said, "No, we ought to have the final say on what's going into the county." I prefer the state way. I think that you have to have it uniform across the state. If you're going to do it on a county-by-county basis, then you'll probably just drive it into the next county or whatever.

DePue: And drive it out of the state, then, most likely.

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah. And I think, as a matter of fact, the siting law that the legislature worked out in Illinois has been a model for other states to do pretty much the same thing. The parameters that are established on how close you can be to a community, and how do you handle the runoff, and how do you handle the waste, and how do you work the odor, and all that sort of thing. And I think it's a pretty good law, but again, lawsuits are filed, and it drags out for years, and finally, the farmer runs out of money and says, "I can't afford to fight this any longer."

DePue: Well, that brings us to the role, then, that the courts and lawyers are playing in a lot of these processes now. Perhaps fifty years ago, farmers would have never dreamed that they would have had to get involved with the judicial system this much.

Samuelson: When young people who come off the farm to go college at the University of Illinois say to me, "Well, what kind of a career should I take?" I say, "I have two suggestions. Number one: international marketing. Learn languages, not only how to speak them, but how to write them and read them. And number two: become an environmental lawyer," because farmers are going to be sued forever, and we need attorneys with a farm background and an understanding of production agriculture to be there to defend the producer side of environmental law and arguments. And probably, in my opinion, the best environmental lawyer in the country today is Gary Bayes(??), who has an Illinois farm. He's based in Washington, and he gets involved in many of the environmental lawsuits that come up, and he wins quite a few of them—not all of them. But we need environmental lawyers, because there are enough on the other side, (laughs) who say, you know, "I—"

DePue: Well, I was going to say, what are the trend lines? Who seems to be winning most of the legal arguments right now?

Samuelson: A lot of them get dragged out to the point where a farmer will give up, just like the wind turbine farm up in my part of Wisconsin. The legal fees get to the point where you can't afford to do it. The important ones that I think Gary has won, he won dust pollution in Washington State—that was a major one—where they were going to prohibit burning. When you produce seed—the grass seed and that sort of thing—you need to burn, and he won that case, where they get permission to—still can burn. He's currently involved in a couple of swine farm cases in Illinois. Been dragging on for four or five years, and I don't know how close they are to resolution, but it's expensive.

DePue: So the lawyers on both sides of the argument are winning out, but—

Samuelson: Well, that's the way it always is in lawsuits: the attorneys win. (laughter) I don't know if the plaintiffs or the defendants ever win. (laughter)

DePue: Another shift of gears, but a minor one here. There has been increasing discussion, dialogue, in the United States about our obese population, and it's translated into interesting things like banning fast-food restaurants in places like San Francisco. Don't know if they've been successful to do that, but at least there's a dialogue about that. Your reaction that whole debate.

Samuelson: Very quick: I am so tired of people running off to Washington to pass legislation to protect ourselves from ourselves. I'm just fed up with it. If we as individuals don't have the sense and the responsibility to conduct ourselves, why should we go to Washington and say, "Okay, take the temptation away from me because I can't... So close McDonalds and close Burger King." And I get equally irritated by the reference of these restaurants serving junk food. There is no junk food, in my opinion, and I'm not alone in that. I spoke recently to the National Convention of the School Nutrition Association—these are the hot lunch people in schools across the country—and I told them that I have my own one-person campaign to do away with the phrase "junk food," because I said, "To a starving child in Nigeria, a Big Mac is not junk food." And boy, a lot of them came up and agreed with me that it's bad terminology. And of course, they're working to improve the education, the nutrition education, with the people who eat school lunches, so they're deeply involved in fighting the obesity issue. But it comes down to parents and individuals making decisions. And this idea of running off to Washington to get a law that'll protect ourselves from ourselves? I've had it up to here with that.

DePue: (laughs) I assume you're familiar with the documentary, *King Corn*, I believe was the name of it? These—

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah. I watched a little bit of it and said—

DePue: Basically their argument was that there are so many things in our food supply now that derive from corn or corn byproducts that that's one of the huge reasons we are an obese population.

Samuelson: Yeah, they're blaming the high-fructose corn sweetener that's used in most of the soda pops today. They're blaming it. And now, another charge to do away with the corn people is we're finding mercury now in corn syrup, so that's something else to be concerned about. But yeah, I'm aware of that, and (laughs) the story that I use—my dad ate all of the wrong foods all of his life, working on a farm. I mean, breakfast was bacon and eggs, and at lunch—or dinner, for us—it was fried meat and potatoes and gravy and bread and butter and cheese, and for supper, before we'd go out and milk the cows, it was the leftovers from noon, and then he'd always have to have a bowl of ice cream before he went to bed—in other words, ate all of the foods that today they say will kill you. And the people who say that are right. It killed my dad at age ninety-five. (laughter) All of these foods that he ate that are so bad for you—and to me, to come up with a blanket diet for the population of the United States is ridiculous, because my makeup is different than yours; my body reacts to things differently than yours do. We have an engineer here at WGN who is constantly eating, and he probably weighs 130 pounds—but he's forever eating. And his metabolism is a lot different than mine.

DePue: I suspect also that your father had other differences in his lifestyle than a lot of the people who are working in cubicles here.

Samuelson: Yeah, no question about that. But I use it to make my point. Because he was active every day—he was physically active and working hard every day. But all these foods that kill you, it did at age ninety-five, and my mother who did the cooking, it killed her at eighty-nine, so... (laughter)

DePue: So you're lucky in that respect.

Samuelson: Yes, I am. I really am. Yeah.

DePue: One other thing in the environmental area, if you will, and that's infrastructure development—things like the waterways, railroad networks, water policy issues, things like that, if you can address those things.

Samuelson: Infrastructure is a major concern, particularly roadways and bridges, because today, when we move grain to market and when we move livestock to market, we have some heavy, heavy truckloads. And I think one of the real concerns is—and it's been addressed by the legislature—well, talked about, and certainly not (unintelligible??) because it takes money—is the bridge situation in Illinois that simply cannot handle a semi load of grain or livestock. That infrastructure, I think, is badly in need of correction. Looking at infrastructure that is not there—broadband. I mean, if you're a student in a rural school, you are at a disadvantage, because very often, you don't have the ability to get on the Internet. And several years ago, there was a move in Illinois to get that done, and now it's being

talked about again, that you do need to—well, I think President Obama is talking about the need for Internet broadband across the entire nation. How much money that'll take, I'm not sure, but this is an infrastructure that has not been built in many cases and I think needs to be built. Railroads play a more important role in moving grain—and the railroads have done a much better job in moving agricultural products, because I remember twenty or thirty years ago, every year at harvest time, we'd be doing stories on "Where are the grain cars? They're not available. We're piling grain on the ground because we can't get railroad cars in there, and why isn't the railroad building more of them." We don't do that anymore, maybe because we have more elevator facility in rural communities, but I think the railroads have done a pretty good job.

DePue: To be more explicit on that one, I know the Burlington Northern Santa Fe here, just a few years ago—2003-2004—has built a series of rail terminals next to massive grain elevators, and as I understand it, they're shipping 110 carloads of grain out once a week from some of these places.

Samuelson: Yeah, "unit trains" is what they call them, and it has dramatically changed the ability to move grain, because in Illinois, you either get them to the river—get the grain to the river and put it on barges down to New Orleans, to the port—or you put it on trucks, or, the best way to do it, probably, is on rail. And in Illinois, most of it goes south; some of it goes to the St. Lawrence Seaway east; if you live up in North Dakota, Minnesota, a lot of that is railed to the port at Duluth, and it goes out to the St. Lawrence; and then the rest of it goes to Portland and Seattle, but primarily Portland, as a main source. And these 110-unit car trains have made a big difference for the railroads, because they're assured now that they've got the commodity to fill the train, and the elevators and the farmers know that they've got this commitment to load the train.

The most interesting one I've found takes me back to Maricopa, Arizona, where they have built this ethanol plant, and it's right next to a 200,000-head cattle feedlot, and involved in the whole complex is a feed manufacturing plant that makes dairy feed for 80 percent of the dairy cows in Arizona. It's a farmer cooperative, the Arizona Grain Company. And visited that in 2008, and twice a week, they bring in a 110-unit train of corn from Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. And that train comes in and is unloaded in six hours and then turns around, and they try to send stuff back on the train, but that's not always possible. But twice a week, they're getting 220 carloads of corn from the Midwest. Now, for feeding the livestock and for making feed, yeah, that works, but the question that I ask: "Does it make sense to truck ethanol out here, or does it make more sense to truck the corn out here and turn it into ethanol?" And they said, "Well, that question will be answered over the next two years." (laughter) They think so. They think that the study they did says yes, it makes more sense, because they use the corn for a lot of other stuff. So.

DePue: This whole dialogue gets us to the issue of economies of scale in agriculture as well. And quickly, if you're talking about that massive amount of movement and production, you're not talking about the small-scale farmer being able to be successful in that kind of environment, are you?

Samuelson: Unless it's a niche product that the farmer is involved in. If it's organic, why, then a smaller farmer can make it. A lot of farmers close to urban areas go to roadside marketing and farm market stands. I know a seventeen-year-old young man who has developed a tremendous market in Chicago for dill that he grows on his grandfather's farm, and trucks it into the produce market in Chicago three days a week, and has developed a great market in three years. So you know, there is—if you're a good manager, and you're innovative, and you think out of the box, you can find a way for the smaller farm to make it. But if you're going to be a grain farmer, the cost of a combine and a tractor today says you've got to have more than 200 acres, because you can't afford to get the equipment that will do what you need it to do if you have 200 acres. And I think as I said earlier, the family farm certainly hasn't died, but oh, what a change from the 200-acre family farm that lives up here with me. That farm is gone. And in today's economy—and I don't get into the social issue here, is it good or bad—but the reality of it all is that it's the direction that we're going, and I don't see it reversing.

DePue: I assume you have some nostalgia for that small family farm of 200 acres?

Samuelson: Oh, I do, yes. And the house where I was born is still there, the barn that I helped my dad build is still there, but we were milking thirty cows, they're milking 180, and they have—two brothers purchased three farms, plus the one they were living on next to ours, so four farms is now one family farm. Still a family, but yeah, totally different.

DePue: Getting back to the marketing side here again, I've had an opportunity to visit one of these unit train terminals, and the part that my brain had a difficult time wrapping around was, okay, here this terminal operator—it was Jay Johnson, in this case, down in Waverly, Illinois—who has to guarantee that he can fill up that train every week throughout the entire year, and knowing full well that there's about two months in the fall when all of this grain is produced. How are they managing that? Both the farmers and the terminal operators—and maybe this gets us back to the Board of Trade and things like that.

Samuelson: Well, they're managing it because there's a lot more on-farm storage than there was, and so when they harvest, they're able to store a lot of it on the farm. I don't know what this elevator has in grain capacity, but it's contracting with the grower, whether you're doing it on a forward contract where, in the spring, the grower will say, "Okay, I'm going to produce in normal weather this many bushels, and I'll guarantee delivery to you. Now you tell me what the price is going to be." If it is not a forward contract

but based on buying it out of the field at harvest time, then that grain elevator, that terminal elevator—if I bring in a load of corn and he pays me four dollars a bushel for that corn, then he's got this risk sitting out there, so before the trading day at the Board of Trade ends, he's on the phone to his broker at the Board of Trade saying, "Okay, I've got this corn, and I want you to sell it at this price" that he really bought it at, and then that's his hedge. He has protected himself, then, in the futures market, in case the market goes against him—he paid four dollars to buy the corn, and then the next day it goes down to three dollars in the cash market, but he has already gone in and sold it at four dollars in the futures market.

Now, the problem that you have with that is this thing called *basis*, where the basis price on the river could be twenty to thirty cents off from the futures price at the Board of Trade, and so we have developed an options market now. You can trade puts and calls. And this is why I have maintained for quite a while that American farmers are just super at producing, but they're not super at marketing, and part of the reason is it's gotten very complicated. That's why I'm glad to see these young people going off to college and coming back to the farm, because they develop the knowledge so that they can really protect themselves in the marketplace much better than the method that I've seen all too often, where I've talked to corn farmers, and they say, "Boy, when corn gets to three dollars a bushel, I'm selling it." Well, corn would get to three dollars and $3.10, so I'll call them up and say, "Hey, congratulations, you got your three dollars," and he'll say, "Oh, I didn't sell it." (laughter) And I know what the next line is. "Why didn't you sell it?" "Well, it's going to go to four dollars."

And farmers rarely sell on an up market, but boy, do they ever sell on a down market, because they keep thinking it's going to go up, and if it goes up another ten cents, I've lost the ten cents. That's why I say you've got to know your cost of production, and then you've got to determine what will be enough profit for you in the marketplace to cover the cost of production and give you a profit, and then you put your order in to sell at that level, and when it gets there, have the discipline to sell it. And it gets there, and now, they're no longer a hedger; they're a speculator, because, "Oh, it's going my way. I'll ride with it up." And then two days later, the market will start to go down, and they'll think, "Well, I'm still right. It'll come back tomorrow." And then the second day, it goes down again, and by the third day, now, you're nervous, and you start selling, and everybody else in that same boat starts selling, and it's just down, down, down. To me, discipline in the marketplace is critical.

I have a son who is a member of the Board of Trade, and he's a pure speculator. He goes in with his investment every day and puts it on the line as a speculator, providing liquidity for the market. And when he told me he was going to go into grain trading when he came out of college—because he'd had a job as a runner and a clerk on the floor at the

board in the Merc—and he said, "I'm going to be a trader, Dad," and I said, "No, you're not. (laugh) No, you're not." Since 1960, I've seen too many friends who develop ulcers, become alcoholics, or die of heart attacks. I said, "David, you have not got the discipline to be a trader. Don't do it." Well, he did, and I take credit for his success, because I told him he couldn't. He has.

DePue: (laughs) He had to prove you wrong.

Samuelson: He had to prove me wrong, and his discipline is astounding. If he gets into a market position and he sees the signs it's going against him, he's out, so he'll take a small loss but get out before it becomes a big loss. And if it starts going his way, he's already determined what level he wants to see, and if it gets close to that level, he takes it. And it's too bad that farmers can't do it, because they have an advantage over him—they have the product. He doesn't. All he's got is a piece of paper that says he's long wheat or he's short wheat. And it's getting better.

And interestingly enough, I'm finding more farm wives doing the marketing. And (laughs) as I like to say in my speeches, I know why, because you guys sit in the combine, and you see that corn and soybeans coming out into the wagon, and you think, "Man, that's the prettiest stuff I've ever grown. I love it," and you don't want to sell it. But when Mama knows there's a bill to pay or a pickup to buy, she sells it. And I talk often about a couple up in Northern Illinois who are friends of mine. They milk 250 cows, and they grow 1,500 acres of cash corn and soybeans, and she does all the marketing. And every day, she sits on that computer probably for an hour. And here's what separates her from a lot of producers: her goal is not to sell is not to sell at the top of the market. Her goal is, at the end of the market year, to have sold everything in the top third of the market. And her husband says she's done it for seven years.

DePue: And he's as proud as you could be of his wife.

Samuelson: Oh, because financially, it's made a tremendous difference. She markets milk in the futures market, and then she sells the grain. There was a trader on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, Uncle Julius—little Jewish fellow—pure speculator—made millions and lost millions. And when he died at age eighty-four, he left what was in his estate to pet hospitals, because he didn't have children, and his wife had passed on, and he had a pet dog, and so that's where his money went. But I'd come down onto the trading floor, and every time I'd come onto the trading floor, Uncle Julius would come up, and he'd say, "Orion, you've got to tell your farmers some things about how they market." I said, "Okay." And I heard this hundreds of times. He said, "First of all, tell them to quit trying to sell at the top of the market. Top is here and gone three weeks before you know it was the top." He said, "Secondly, if you think corn is going to three dollars, put your order in at $2.97, because everybody else will probably be at three dollars, and so the market will hit three, and everybody sells,

and it turns around and goes down. Leave a little for the other guy, and you'll go to the bank." (laughter) And then his third one that summed up the first two was, "Remember, in the market, there's always profit for the bulls, always profit for the bears, never any profit for the hogs—they get killed." (laughter)

DePue: Words to make a living by, right?

Samuelson: Absolutely, and he did. He really did. He was a delightful character.

DePue: I think you need to explain at least to me what "liquidity" means.

Samuelson: "Liquidity" means having cash in the market, and there is a good example of that (laughs) in the current economy. The banks, the financial institutions, don't have the cash on hand to fulfill the obligations—making loans or credit or that sort of thing—and so the liquidity is gone. The grain market, the CME group, has the liquidity that's provided by everybody in the market, and speculators in particular. I mean, they put cash into that market every day, and that provides liquidity so that if there's somebody out there who wants to sell corn at three dollars a bushel, there is a trader on the other side that has the liquidity, the cash, to take that opposite position, and that's what makes a market. You can't have just sellers; you can't have just buyers. You've got to have both sides of that market covered, and that's liquidity. And the thing that separates the CME group in Chicago from the New York Stock Exchange is the cash is there. It's in the bank. Wall Street, we have found out, it isn't there.

DePue: Well, just listening to you talk about farmers and people at the Board of Trade, I'm beginning to think that maybe some of the best economists in the United States right now are those producers out there in those fields, because their very life depends on guessing right.

Samuelson: Yeah, it does. But they don't always guess right, because they start out as hedgers to protect their crop, and then the hedge goes their way, and they're making money, and then they say, "Okay."

DePue: And it's not just selling their crop, from what you've explained before. They're also having to make decisions about when to buy the fertilizer and whether or not to lock in a futures contract for their fuel and things like that.

Samuelson: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it's not just market—well, it's marketing on the sell side and on the buy side. And volatility is good in the marketplace, but you'd better be right in how you trade it. And unfortunately, well, VeraSun Energy, making corn ethanol—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen plants—declared bankruptcy because last summer, they needed corn to run the plants, and they saw corn going to seven dollars a bushel, and they thought, Oh my God, if oil keeps going up, then everything else is going to go up, and we don't see oil turning around, so that means—and there were economists saying corn would hit ten dollars a bushel. So the people at VeraSun took a look at that, and they said, "We'd better buy the corn

we need in November and December and January right now, because it's going to go higher and higher." So they did. And then by November, corn had fallen 50 percent, but they're still stuck with the purchase price up here, and contract says they will pay that. Then the price of ethanol dropped, and they were caught, just like farmers who watched the oil price go up and saw nitrogen go over a thousand dollars a ton, and they were used to paying four hundred, and a few years ago, 300 dollars. So they took a look at that—oil's never going to get lower, so we'd better lock in our fertilizer price for next spring right now. So they locked it in at a thousand dollars, and now, the cost of fertilizer's probably down to five or six.

DePue: What's the implications, then, when the price swings for these commodities are over this huge range versus twenty years ago when it was a much tighter range that they would swing between?

Samuelson: Probably easier to trade then because you didn't have as much at risk. You know, if the market moves five cents on a contract of corn, that's two hundred and fifty dollars. Today, on a contract of corn, if it moves thirty cents, which it can do, then you're looking at 1,500 dollars, and so your exposure and your risk—much greater today than it was back when we had those kinds of moves. And I can remember in the sixties, where if corn moved two cents a bushel in a day, that was a market. Today, it can—well, there are daily limits—it can only go so far up or down—but that's thirty cents a bushel. On a contract at fifty dollars a penny, that means sixty cents, so you can have a three thousand–dollar price swing on one contract in one day.

DePue: Do you see the market settling down in the future?

Samuelson: It'll never be what it was. Yeah, I think it will. It will settle down, because there was a time we weren't even trading fundamentals—you know, we weren't trading supply, demand, weather. We're back to trading weather now on soybeans and corn to a certain extent, watching the weather in South America, so we are back to some fundamentals. But as I say, the trading atmosphere has changed with the funds that are bundling commodities and tying corn to oil to copper and using those in investment portfolios for investors like you and me if we're into a mutual fund. And that has totally changed the complexion of the thinking. Back in the sixties, yeah, you looked at the users, you looked at the producers, and you looked at the weather, and you looked at supply and demand, and that's pretty much all you had to look at. Well, now, in the last six months, none of that (laughs) has meant anything. And the fascinating thing is, with ethanol and biofuels, the price of oil has affected the price of corn and soybeans, and particularly soybean oil, because that goes into a biofuel. And so if you're wondering which way the soybean market is going, you look at the price of oil. Never had to do that before.

DePue: Let's end this block of discussion here with taking us now to the issue of credit—the farmer and credit—because that world has changed dramatically. Suddenly we're hearing that there is no liquidity in banks anymore, as well.

Samuelson: Right, but there is more liquidity in community banks and in rural banks than there are in the Citigroups and the JP Morgans and the rest of them.

DePue: Let me phrase the question this way, then: I hear all the time that farmers have to borrow money at the beginning of a season to purchase their fertilizer, to purchase their fuel, and I'm wondering, is that because they're leveraged themselves so much, or are we talking about farmers who are still paying for purchasing land in the first place, that don't own their land outright?

Samuelson: Some of that is certainly the case, but it's been traditional, if you're not a livestock operator—if you're just a grain farmer—it has been traditional that you borrow the money at planting time—that's your operation loan, as it's called—and then at harvest time—and generally when you borrow that money, you've got to present a selling plan to the bank who's going to give you that loan, so they have an idea. And some banks now will insist that you go in and hedge that price as soon as you can, so that you're not going to get knocked out of the loan if the market just falls apart. So the rules have changed from the standpoint of protection in the futures market or the options market. If you're in the livestock business, then it's totally different. Then, you probably—the timing isn't all that critical, but during the year, you do have to have operating expenses, and you do operate on credit. If your farm is paid for, you're in a much better position. The bank likes that a lot, because now you've got collateral. If your farm isn't paid for, then credit probably gets to be a little more difficult.

But the thing in this current economy, in this current turndown—I have spoken at meetings of two regional banks in Illinois in the last three months—community banks with maybe nine or ten banks, and another company with four or five banks. And I always ask the bank president and the lending officer, "How is your agricultural portfolio?" And they say, "Very good. Very good," because farmers have been able to make a profit. And then I say, "What about your availability of credit for them? Are you in the same situation as my bank, which is Citibank?" And they say, "No, we didn't get into the subprime market. We didn't do the things that those big banks did, and so we pretty much stayed local with our investment and with our loans and our portfolio, and so we're not in the situation that they're in." So I said, "Maybe Citibank should come and take a look at your operation and see what you're doing," and they said, "You know, you lose customers by turning down loans at times, but in the long run, you're a lot more solid because you turned them down." And one president of the bank said, "I'd much rather make a customer angry than have him get a loan and fail. And in some cases, we refused the loan, or we cut it in half, and the farmer survived, and had we not done that, he

would have lost and we would have lost." So I think in rural—and farm credit system is very strong, but because of the entire financial economy, they have had to tighten their loan requirements a little bit, but they're in much better shape than the big city banks.

DePue: Okay, one other question, then, in this area, and that's renting versus owning your own land.

Samuelson: You know, that's interesting. It's an emotional argument, because back in the eighties, when times were tough, I spoke at the Ohio Farm Bureau, and a young farmer came up to me and said, "I'm doing okay, because I'm not going to buy this expensive land. I'm not going to take on debt. I would rather use the money I put into buying a farm into doing a better job of farming, and so I want to rent. I do not want to own; I want to rent, because putting all that money into land just doesn't make any sense to me. I'll use it to farm." There were two or three more mature farmers standing within earshot, and they heard the conversation, and when it ended and he walked away, they said, "That is so wrong. If you don't own the farmland, then you're not part of the community. If you rent it, you could walk away, and so you don't care about investing in schools, and you don't care about this. If you don't own the land, that's wrong thinking."

So you have these two emotional sides going for you, but a lot of farmers have to rent today because non-farm investors own the land. A lot of investors finally realized, with the market doing what it's been doing, and the uncertainty, finally realized that hey, as Will Rogers said, they ain't making any more. And so farmland is not a spectacular investment, but it's a solid investment. So that means that a lot of farmers have to rent. But that makes them very vulnerable in a time like last year and this year, because with the commodity prices going sharply higher, these landowners are saying, "Hey, you may be my friend, and you may have been farming my land for me for twenty years, but I've got to have 200 dollars an acre more, because other people are here trying to rent the land." So it does lead to some hard feelings.

DePue: Has the cost of an acre of prime farmland taken the same course as commodities?

Samuelson: Not to the extent of the ups and downs. We've seen a little dropoff in farmland at the moment. Where we've seen the dropoff in farmland value is development land. There are many farms around Chicago right now where stores held options to buy the farmland, and shopping center companies held options to buy the farmland, and they've dropped. So the value of development farmland has dropped sharply, but production farmland, not a sharp drop.

DePue: Okay, I'm going to end with a teaser for our next session and how we're going to start. I'd like to next time start with a talk about taxes, inheritance law, and estate planning, and see what your reaction to those are.

Samuelson: Okay.

DePue: Thank you, Orion.

(End of interview #4. Interview #5 continues on next page.)

Interview with Orion Samuelson

AIS-V-L-2009-002.05

Interview # 1: February 3, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by the ALPL Oral History Program. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability, and reviewed by the interviewee. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

DePue: Orion, we're back again. This is the afternoon of the third of February, 2009. I think this is going to be our last session, Orion.

Samuelson: Okay.

DePue: We're working against the schedule again. It's not because we think you don't have much more to say, because we know you have a lot more to talk about. (chuckles)

Samuelson: I think you pretty well got everything.

DePue: Well, let's talk taxes and inheritance law –

Samuelson: Right.

DePue: —and the impact that has on farming.

Samuelson: The inheritance tax, or the death tax as some people like to call it, is something that has been a challenge for farmers. Not a whole lot of them are affected by the death tax other than they do have to pay a lawyer to make sure that they're not going to be affected adversely by the

inheritance tax. I have editorialized in favor of eliminating the inheritance tax. It hasn't been done, and come the year 2010 it could revert to the full amount that was there ten years ago when they started the phase-down of it. I think my idea is changing a little bit on inheritance. Part of that is based on a conversation I had with former Texas Congressman Charlie Stenholm at the Cattlemen's Convention. Charlie was asked about the inheritance tax, and he said he is against eliminating the inheritance death tax. He said the timing right now is not good at all because of the economy of the nation and the situation that we're in. He said he just doesn't see anything happening. He sees the death tax reverting to the full amount, the higher tax situation when this current…

DePue: What is the full amount?

Samuelson: You know, I don't even remember; it's ten years ago since we had to deal with it. But I think the exemptions are rather low, the value.

DePue: A million dollars, anything over a million dollars?

Samuelson: Something like that, but I wouldn't want to be quoted because as I say that was ten years ago.

DePue: Okay.

Samuelson: Charlie's reasoning on this—first of all he doesn't think it's politically possible, but he said that rather than eliminate it, he would much rather see legislation that would escalate the exemption amount—he said probably to ten million dollars. If you get it to ten million dollars it would not affect that many farms and ranches. Because, he said, as we look at what's happened over the last decade and you've seen the tremendous amount of money that has been made by some individuals outside of agriculture, money that has been made on bonuses and everything else, he said, do you want them to not pay inheritance tax when they die? Don't you think that some of these gains were ill-gotten anyway and probably not deserved and so we should at least have access to them when the estate is passed on. So he said there's that side of it, plus the other side, he thinks politically it makes more sense to just get the exemption raised and that would pretty much take care of it.

DePue: What are the implications though for that son who is due to inherit his father's land, there's no estate plan in place. How does that play out for the individual young man who wants to continue on in farming, but the inheritance laws makes that more challenging.

Samuelson: The first thing you have to do is get that young man to sit down with his father while he's still alive and make an estate plan. That's probably one of the things that **really** concerns me, is the fact that so few farmers have an estate plan. Here, too, I've editorialized about the importance of the

family sitting down together; this is not easy emotionally to sit down with Mom and Dad and to talk about what's going to happen to the farm when they're no longer here. But I say the worst thing that parents can do is to leave an estate without a plan. Because, if you think you do not have an estate plan, you do, and it's the IRS, because they love it if you don't have an estate plan. Because that means they get their hands on a lot of what you have worked so hard to keep and don't feel it's automatically going to be passed on to your heirs because under the law, it will not be. We did a series of meetings—two friends of mine: a financial manager and a farm realtor—about three years ago, that we called Pathway to Progress. We designed it for farmers that were in the path of urban sprawl in the Chicago area. The whole purpose was to let them know the options that are available if they are going to be involved in selling land for development. I remember the meeting we had at Rockford; there were fifty farmers there. At the outset I said, "How many of you have an estate plan?" And I think five people raised their hands. That meant that the rest of them in that room, if they were killed in an automobile accident going home that day, there was **no** estate plan in place. So we **strongly** recommended that that's the first thing you do: Get a capable lawyer. The other interesting thing is, this farm may be worth ten million dollars and farmers don't want to spend a thousand for an attorney to possibly set something up.

DePue: Is that what's holding them back?

Samuelson: In some cases it is, absolutely. Because my friend who is the financial planner followed up with a lot of the people after the meeting who said, Yeah, they'd like to talk more and the big hang-up for several of them was: Hey, paying a lawyer one or two or three thousand dollars, we're not going to lay out that kind of money. And they didn't. They didn't do an estate plan. But if you don't have an estate plan and I've seen this happen—and my friend who is a financial manager has seen it happen—it'll tear a family apart, it really will. I know of one case where the parents passed away; there was a son deeply involved in the farming operation, there were two sisters who were married and were not. The son wanted to expand the operation and bring more livestock on to the farm and add some acres to it. The two sisters wanted their money **right now**. And by the time they got it all settled, because the parents had not designated that this amount would go the son and this amount would go to the two sisters and that there would be a five year pay out, or a six year pay out. None of that was in an estate plan. As a result that family doesn't speak. He doesn't speak to the two sisters today because it stopped his expansion plan, it has curtailed his farming operation and, because he had to sell land in order to pay them off the full amount. Had the parents just left an estate plan that wouldn't have happened. It tears families apart and it's so unfortunate.

DePue: What's your advice to a family, say you've got parents, they're getting up in years and the point in time when they need to pass on the farm, they've got, as you've just said, a son or a couple of sons or a daughter who are really into the farming and you can see them continuing on this farm, and then there's siblings who aren't. How would you advise them to develop that estate plan that's going to work?

Samuelson: I'm not an attorney, but I would certainly say the person who wants to keep that farm in the family and farm it should be treated differently than those who simply want their money out of it. I don't think that is unfair at all because in the case of the family I outlined, the two sisters were married, off on their own jobs with their own families, but the son was there on the farm with his wife doing the work and keeping a watch over his mom and dad and was really enhancing the value of the property. I think he should be treated differently than the two sisters. You talk to estate planners and many of them will say the same thing, that the person who wants to continue farming on that farm should be treated differently than those who simply want their money out of it. The other thing, and I do get this question after editorials, and I say, you have to sit down and do this; you don't have to wait until your parents are elderly. As a matter of fact, get the planning in motion early and an estate attorney can do a lot to avoid a lot of tax problems and everything that happens. But the entire family has to be included because then some will say: Just my children, not their spouses. And I say: No; their spouses better be involved because they're going to have a major input into this whole discussion. If they're not involved they're going to resent it, they're left out and yet they're part of the family and it can create even more problems after you're gone and the estate is divided. You have to have the daughter or the son-in-law and you have to have the whole family and be very frank. I remember my friend, the financial manager, saying that it took him a year and a half to get a family to come in. There were six children and the parents and a big farming operation. So they sat down and the first thing that my friend does is, he turns to the parents and says: What would you like to see happen to this farm after you're gone. What do you envision? What do you want it to be? And then when they talked, he turned to the kids and said: And what do you want it to be? That was the first time the kids had heard the parents say what they wanted the farm to be. And it was the first time that the parents had heard from the kids on what they would like to see. Had never discussed it at all and there were some surprises there for everybody. But in that case it did work. They got the plan laid out; the farm stayed intact and it continued in the family name. So I just urge people to get an attorney, make the investment that could save thousands or hundreds of thousands in that investment if you have the plan in place.

DePue: From what you explained, not just saving money, but saving feelings and relationships as well.

Samuelson: That's probably more important than the money when it comes down to it. My friend, the financial manager, while I've only seen it a couple of times, he has seen it time and again, where it just, **just** splits the family. That's sad.

DePue: Let's again change gears. We've talked about a lot of the things that have been evolving in farming in the last fifty years, sixty or seventy years from when you first started as a young lad on the farm in Wisconsin—

Samuelson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: There's a couple areas that we haven't talked very much about. I'd like to get your opinion about the impact of genetics, and especially in livestock, with the hogs you were butchering back on the farm and rendering for lard are quite a bit different, are they not, from the hogs we have out there today? And that's just one breed, one example.

Samuelson: Yeah, it is, but you see it across the board in livestock. You see it in beef cattle. When I first came to Chicago in 1960, we'd go out to the International Livestock Show which brought in some of the best cattle in the world. You saw heavy cattle that were pretty squatty and not a lot of length to them to give you the rib that would give you more of the primal cuts and all of that. But at that time you wanted a blocky, square, animal out there that was solid and pretty heavy. We watched that change over the years, first of all with genetics, but secondly, with new breeds being brought in. I remember when Charolais cattle made their first appearance at the International Livestock Show. As a matter of fact, Charlie Potter who was president of the Union Stockyards at the time was responsible for bringing the Charolais breed into the U.S. and it was a drawn out process. They had to spend thirty days in quarantine at a facility that was not anywhere near animals in this country. It took approval of the French government and from the U.S. government and all that. they finally brought the Charolais cattle in and, of course, the reaction of the Hereford and Angus people was, Hey, that will never work; they're too big, too rangy and all of that. Pretty soon you saw the breed having a major influence on the basic breeds here. You'd get Charolais-Angus cross, for example, and it would tend to lengthen out the animal and give you more lean primal meat cuts and that sort of thing. So you watched that evolution over the years and then you have the Limousin cattle that were brought in.

DePue: Limousin cattle?

Samuelson: Limousin, that's the breed. It's a European breed, L-i-m-o-u-s-i-n. So you had Charolais and you had Limousin and then you had the cross breeds.I If you were in the South you had Santa Gertrudis that could handle the heat much better in the south part of the country. It was interesting just watching that animal evolve into a meatier animal that provided more

return for the packer and for the producer. Same with hogs; it, again, was the same thing.

DePue: What's been driving the changes? Has it been production end of the equation or has it been the American tastes have been changing over time?

Samuelson: I think it's been a combination, but more the producer's side and the processor's side. Processors want as uniform an animal as they can coming across that harvest floor because it makes what they do a lot easier. Particularly in hogs, they like uniformity in the length of the hog, the carcass of the hog and everything, rather than having a short one and a heavy one and then a leaner and a longer one. So I think more the processing side and the production side has had that change. The consumer may not even be aware that he or she is getting a better product because of this breeding and because of what they're doing. Then the other important part of the picture in livestock is the change in feeding and nutrition. That has advanced greatly whether it's a dairy cow, a beef animal or a chicken or a hog. The nutrition side of it is much more complex, more formulated than we had seen. I remember when we fed our dairy cows, we'd take oats and corn to town and the feed mill would grind it and put in some minerals and a little addition and you'd bring it home and you'd feed that. Well, that's changed.

DePue: What's your argument then for those who say, You know, that free-range chicken tastes so much better?

Samuelson: You know what, I will **never** order free-range chicken in a restaurant because I remember what our chickens ate in the barnyard when they were free range. (both laugh). Honestly, I will **never** order free-range chicken – never.

DePue: So you don't buy the argument that it's tastier or you just have that lingering memory?

Samuelson: Lingering memory. You know, I saw what they ate out in the barnyard and I don't think that really promotes that good a product.

DePue: Here's another evolution or revolution, if you will. You alluded to this earlier: GPS.

Samuelson: Major change.

DePue: How has that impacted farming?

Samuelson: It's impacted it in several ways. Again, it has increased the efficiency. But, I think what is probably the biggest benefit of all, it has allowed the farmers to apply fertilizer where it's needed. Let me explain that because it was so well demonstrated to me at a Wisconsin Farm Progress Days

event quite a while ago. I'm standing looking at a monitor and I see this moving line going across the monitor screen and it changes color as it goes. Then I look out at the corn field and it's a combine that's crossing the cornfield, and that's what I'm seeing on that screen. The reason it changes color is, there are yield monitors on the cutting bar of that combine that every twelve inches gives you the yield that's coming across that combine. Where the color changes is when the yield increases. I think in that field at that time in one trip across the field the yield went anywhere from ninety-eight to one hundred and twenty-two bushels that was being harvested as it moved across that line. Well, it was kind of a hilly field, so if it was on top of the hill you'd be getting less yield; then as you'd go down where the richer soil was you'd get heavier yield. So it gave you that kind of a read-out on the yield. So now let's fast-forward to springtime when it's time to put fertilizer on that field. You take that same computer card that measured the yield and it will be programmed to put into the fertilizer applicator truck when it's there to put more fertilizer where the yield was greater since that took more nutrients out of the soil, and less fertilizer where the yield wasn't as great because that didn't take as much of the nutrients out of the soil. So as a result you are putting down pretty much what you really need as you move across that field thanks to GPS.

DePue: Does that mean you got a lot less of that fertilizer that's ending up in the water system?

Samuelson: Yes, yeah, because you're using what is needed. Secondly, you are not doing any doubling. If you're doing the driving and you're tilling the field or putting fertilizer on, yeah, you've got the marker out here, but you may be a foot or two feet over the marker so you're applying double amount there, you've already put down an amount and now you're going back over and doing it again. You're using more fuel because you're not covering as much of the field with each pass. You put all that together and it just raises the efficiency of what you are doing. There was a time when you'd sit in the cab of the tractor and when you got to the end of the row you'd physically turn the tractor. Now you no longer have to do that. You can program that in and it will get to the end, it will raise the tillage equipment, it will make the turn and it will go right back. I know some farmers in North Dakota who at planting time run the tractor twenty-four hours without a driver. They just keep it going. You don't have the fatigue factor and you don't have the doubling, you don't have the missed rows and that sort of thing so it has made the use of the production tools much more efficient.

DePue: Same analogy for herbicides and pesticide application?

Samuelson: Same thing, that's right. Because again, you're not doing any doubling, you're not going over an area. You know, okay, it's not much; it's a foot

or two feet, that's not much. But when you add up the entire hundred acres or hundred and sixty acres then it really does make a difference.

DePue: In all of your travels throughout the world then, I want you to reflect on where that level of technology is being used and where you're not seeing it used, and maybe the dynamics there.

Samuelson: Not seeing much of it in Asia. You are seeing it in South America, Brazil, Argentina, seeing it in Australia. You're seeing it in Europe but certainly not as much as you see it here.

DePue: Because the scale of farming?

Samuelson: Yes. I think farms tend to be smaller. In Europe, after going through World War II they saw what it was like to not have the ability to produce food, because farms were torn up, fields were torn up and everything. So Europe has made a conscious effort to keep that smaller farm in business. They do that with subsidizations and so you're going to have smaller farms to deal with there because it's government policy to not let them get large and in few hands rather than in a lot of hands. They want people to be able to produce.

DePue: The next series of questions will be dealing with cultural issues in farming, so let's start with this one: the future of farm communities.

Samuelson: Depends so much on the leadership in the community. You see towns that wither and die and that does happen if they lose the industry that's there. In the case of the small town that I lived next to, there was a creamery there. All of the milk came to that creamery and when the creamery closed the town pretty well dried up. It's made a little bit of a comeback but not much. An ethanol plant has done a great deal to bring a community back. But it really comes down to how committed the residents of that community are to keeping it alive and making sure that it is a thriving community. I think one of the things that will help a lot of the communities is getting broadband; that is much better than dial-up.[1] That could keep younger people in the community because they could have a city job that they could be doing from that community. Or families that are living there could get outside work, I think, because of having the computer capability. But there's a town in southwestern North Dakota, Bowman, North Dakota. I was invited to speak there two years ago. You could hardly get there from anywhere and I ended up flying in to South Dakota, into the Black Hills, and then chartering a plane to fly north to get up to the Bowman community. It's pretty desolate country; there's not a whole lot. Lot of big cattle ranches. But then I saw something else that was down there, those little oil pumps; they discovered oil, I think about

[1] Referring to telephone dial-up internet connections which were being replaced at the time of interview.

ten or twelve years ago. One seventy-six year old rancher said, You know all my ranching life I'd scraped and scraped and given up on getting things that would have made life more comfortable because I didn't have the money. Now, I get a check for seventy-five thousand dollars every month and I don't know what to do with it. (both laugh) Have no idea what to do with it. But you get into the town of Bowman and here is as thriving a community of fourteen hundred people as I've ever seen. They have a new high school; they have a senior citizen home; they have an excellent museum, they have a fire department that not only serves the community, but trains firemen for other communities; homes are neat and nicely done; and nearly every public building had a name on it. I met the mayor, a young lady, thirty-seven years old; she was a spark plug mayor. I said, why are these names on all of these buildings? She said, Because our citizens believe in the community and they put us in the estate and in the will and so the high school was really paid for by four families. They had a beautiful gymnasium that is just magnificent. And, wherever you looked you saw things you would not see in most communities. Now, part of it was oil money. But there are those people like the rancher who said, I don't know what to do with it and so they give it to the community. I guess that's what I mean by leadership that says, This community is going to live or this community is going to die.

DePue: So much of the community's identify is tied up in the institutions of the town. We've talked about rural churches already and how important that is to the identity of the community. How about those schools, especially when you get to the painful subject of school consolidation?

Samuelson: We went through school consolidation in Wisconsin two years after I graduated from high school. It was probably one of the most angry fights that you'd ever seen. First of all, people didn't want to see their school close. Secondly, if that was going to happen, they didn't want it to be in the next community, they wanted the school to be in their community. You're right, it's another one of those "tear the community apart" situations because emotions run so high because the people who are not going to school did at one time, it's their school, their kids' school, they want it to be their grandkids' school. But, on the other hand, if you're going to give your kids and grandkids the education that they need in this world today, then you've got to have a facility that can do it. So most of the consolidation has happened, I think, in states like Wisconsin and Illinois. I don't see a whole lot more consolidation. But the tax burden on that property owner, particularly the farmer, continues to go up. It gets tougher and tougher to maintain one of these schools and get the equipment and curriculum and the teachers you need. So rural education is a challenge, it really is. I look back on my rural education and I think it prepared me pretty well.

DePue: That one room school house.

Samuelson: That one room eight grade school house gave me the basics. I still use them today. I mean I can do a lot of multiplication and addition and subtraction without a calculator or a computer.

DePue: But, I suspect—you've already alluded to this several times—but you're counseling somebody now about what they need to do if they're graduating from high school and thinking about going into farming. What would you tell them?

Samuelson: First of all I'd tell them to go to college and get a degree in anything from… I'd probably recommend at least a minor in business management. Then if they wanted animal science or agronomy or something like that, that would give them farm background, fine. But I think that business management…

DePue: Agricultural economics, that was one of them that I've heard the academicians talk about.

Samuelson: Right. Basically where you get the business management course is in Ag Economics. And so I'd suggest that they do that. Secondly, I would suggest they get into some communications course because, I'm prejudiced, but you can be the greatest scientist in the world and if you can't explain it to me then not much happens with whatever you're doing. And, so, I would recommend that they become good communicators because with so few in farming we need good, strong communicators. And then I would suggest that, if there's a family farm to come back to, I'd suggest that they go away for four or five years and work in town, maybe go into banking, or whatever else and then come back to the farm.

DePue: Why?

Samuelson: Because they have then gotten the background away from the farm so they understand the other side of the consumer product. It just broadens their experience. I'm chairman of the board of the Illinois Agricultural Leadership Foundation. Our purpose there is to develop articulate leaders in agriculture. We go out and get private funding and we provide a two year course for thirty applicants who are selected, probably from a field of seventy or eighty who apply. We interview and go back and forth on the thirty we select. And then there are thirteen three-day seminars in the two years. There is a one-week stay in Washington, D.C. to get a good close look at the way government works, not just agriculture, but Treasury Department, Defense Department, the State Department, so that they have an understanding of what makes this country run. And then the second year there is a two-week international trip, not to go and see how people farm, but to see what government policy is on environmental issues, on technology, on trade. Yeah, they will go out and see two farms, but they'll basically meet with the leaders of that country to get an idea of what

makes it tick. The last group we had went to Poland, to Czechoslovakia and ended up in Germany. We've sent them to South America, we've sent them to China, we've sent them to the European Union, we've sent them to the Soviet Union; each year, each class, we take to a different place. Our goal when they come out of that class is to become a leader in the local community—could be church, could be school, could be the local cooperative—or in the national community. And out of that course—we've been doing it now, I think, this is the fourteenth class—and we've had the first-ever lady Director of Agriculture in Illinois; the current president of the Illinois Farm Bureau, a president of the National Corn Growers Association, president of the American Soybean Association have all come through that training program. Agriculture so badly needs articulate people who use good grammar. One of the real irritants I have is if I'm interviewing a farm leader or something and he'll say, "Well, I have went there before." Just drives me up the wall because that perpetuates this hayseed image that some people have of farmers. I think that we need to have articulate people who are equally at home in a conference board room, or a corporate board room as they are out in the combine cab or the tractor cab. That is what this program strives to do, and I think we've been very successful in building that kind of leadership in Illinois.

DePue: You play a huge role yourself because you and Max are two of the more prominent voices in agriculture out there.

Samuelson: Part of the training program is, each class gets in front of the TV camera with me and have no idea what I'm going to ask them. I find it hard to be nasty to people, but I tend to take the role of an urban reporter saying, What kind of poison are you putting in my food as you go out there and do this farming? It's designed to help them react quickly and think on their feet because if there's an issue, if there's a mad cow breakout you can have a camera in your face right now saying, "Well, am I going to die"? So that's part of the media training. Again, I'm prejudiced, but I think you have to be able to communicate.

DePue: I'd be willing to bet that most of the people who go through that drill remember it; it stays with them.

Samuelson: Once we have done it, The interview runs about three or four minutes and we do that out of the meeting room, individually. Then when I've done all thirty, we all get back into the meeting room with the monitors set up and we play each one back.

DePue: (chuckles) That's a dirty trick.

Samuelson: Well, I ask the other class members, "Okay, critique them, keeping in mind that you're going to be critiqued, too. Let's keep it constructive and let's keep it positive." You're right. They do not forget it and a lot of them

fear it because they know it's a part of the course. For this current class that came on board last October, I'll be doing the nasty interviewing in July. It takes about six hours of program time to do it, by the time we have interviewed each one and then played back and offered the critique. Two or three years down the road a lot of people will come back to me and say, You know, thanks to some idea of what could happen, I've been able to handle this sort of thing.

DePue: It's an invaluable lesson I'm sure. Next question I think is another one close to your heart—maybe heart is the right word here to use—rural health care issues.

Samuelson: I shouldn't keep talking about myself. I served on the board of a major hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois for six years. I learned enough about medicine and delivery of health care to become dangerous. I am truly concerned about the delivery of health care in the rural communities. When I grew up we had a family doctor in the town that was eight miles away. He wasn't a surgeon but he was a family doctor and he'd make the house calls if you needed them. We don't have that much in rural America anymore. As a matter of fact, we don't have hospitals very close, because the cost of a hospital just continues to escalate. I've seen what's happened to hospital costs since the late seventies when I was on the board of trustees of Lutheran General Hospital. And it has just escalated dramatically. As a result, if the Medicare payments aren't on time or if the state's payments aren't on time, pretty soon this rural hospital is gone. And then where do you go? Well, one of the improvements that I find very encouraging is tele-medicine. Carle Clinic in Illinois: I know if patient is really ill at a town forty miles away, if there's a small clinic there, they can go in and do the diagnosis by teleconference. That's good, but we've got to find a way to—well, it's across the entire system, not just rural—but urban people have more access to health facilities than the rural people do. I guess this was really brought home to me four years ago when I came within thirty minutes of leaving the planet because of flesh-eating bacteria in my throat. After the four hour surgery the doctor came out and told my wife, had we started thirty minutes later we couldn't have stopped it; he'd be gone. Well, among the get well cards that I got, I got a letter from a lady in Kansas saying, I'm delighted you survived and you're doing well. And she said I'm glad you're not living here because, she said, our closest hospital is an hour and forty-five minutes away. So, if you lived here, I guess you wouldn't be here. It really, really drove it home to me how vulnerable people are in rural communities. I don't have the answer. I don't know how to fix it because it's expensive. Building and maintaining a hospital is expensive. So I don't know what the answer is but I spoke last summer to the directors and managers of rural hospitals in Illinois. Afterward I heard some very encouraging stories, and I heard some very scary stories of what's happening to hospitals who are not getting their payments on time, and the inability to attract competent staff. Nurse

shortage is bad in the urban community;, it's worse in the rural community. Doctors? Hey, they want to come to the big city where the money is and the specialty is; they don't want to make house calls in the country.

DePue: I suspect you've seen the same thing I have driving in rural areas. You get to the edge of the town and there's a big sign up advertising that there's a position for a doctor available if you just come to town.

Samuelson: Yeah, just come to town, we'll do a lot. But I can understand the cost of getting a medical degree today is expensive. You do the interning, it's difficult on family and so when you're finally ready to make a living, you want to make as much of a living as you can. I can understand that. Some communities have established scholarship funds for medical scholarships with the provision if you're the recipient and you accept it, once you have your medical degree you come back and practice at least five years in the home community. I asked some of the hospital administrators at the meeting last summer if it's working and some said Yes others said No. Then I wanted to know those who stay for the five years if they stay longer and it was about fifty-fifty. After five years they were ready to head for the city, the bigger hospital.

DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit more about that big city and boundaries between rural areas and the big city, and urban sprawl.

Samuelson: Major problem until the economy turned down and then all of a sudden it has slowed down this business of urban sprawl. Over the years I've watched an interesting evolution in the Chicago area. I use this Cessna airplane quite a bit which let's us fly at twenty-five hundred feet and get a good look at what's happening below us. I would say twenty-five, thirty years ago when you'd fly out of one of the close-in suburbs of Chicago it wasn't too far out before you encountered farm land; you'd see a mixture of livestock farms, dairy farms and grain farms and so on. And then over, probably the next decade or so, the livestock farms sort of disappeared and now you were basically looking at grain farms with no livestock; that was in the belt surrounding the city in the suburbs of Chicago. Well, then over the next decade it evolved even further and the grain farms moved farther out; now you see the farms that are closer to the suburbs, the green industry. You see the landscape farms, the tree farms, the sod farms that all have to be close to their market. So they tend now to do the production closest to the suburban area. Then you go farther out and the grain farms and then you go farther out and the livestock farms are there. So I've watch that evolution from the standpoint of Chicago's urban sprawl. But you find some farmers who don't want to sell, and they hold out. Pretty soon they are totally surrounded by housing developments. Then the battle starts and winds up with, once again, the lawyers probably benefitting the most from it. And that's unfortunate.

DePue: You grew up on a farm.

Samuelson: Yes.

DePue: Your identity is as a farmer?

Samuelson: Yeah.

DePue: A broadcaster and a farmer.

Samuelson: Right.

DePue: Emotionally, what's the tug of war going on in you when you see that kind of urban sprawl?

Samuelson: Well, it bothers me to see very productive farm land covered with asphalt because you know it will never be productive again. Once you've done that, you're not going to reclaim it. I guess I would advocate not doing five acre home sites out in the country. I think that as world population grows we're going to have to do our expanding vertically rather than horizontally. I don't know if it's the best use of land to put a home on five acres so that somebody can say, hey I've got this little farm. If we're going to develop farm land for urban living, I think we have to use as little of the land as possible; I think we have to put people closer together. I live in a community now that twelve years ago was a dairy farm. It now has fifty-eight hundred homes. But the distance from my house to my neighbor's house is probably ten feet. And my back yard is probably a sixteenth of an acre. So I do have outdoor room, but I'm not taking up much land. I mean, we put up fifty-eight hundred homes on probably twelve hundred acres, and left room for an eighteen-hole golf course and a large pond and a lot of wetlands and all the amenities; it's a Sun City Dell Webb development in Huntley, Illinois. When I first saw it I said I could never live in a place like that with fifty-eight hundred homes that close together. But I've been there for three years now and it works out very well. I feel that I haven't taken a lot of productive farm land, but I'm still enjoying quality of life.

DePue: A final question on the cultural side of things deals with those farmers who find that they are compelled to find employment off the land, then a parallel question in terms of how the gender roles in those farms are changing over time.

Samuelson: I think one of the driving forces for an off-farm job besides additional income, and maybe even more important than additional income—health insurance. Because if you're a farmer you buy your own health insurance; there is no plan out there for you. In my case, I have health insurance here at WGN. Going back to the cost of medical care today, I think a lot of farm couples look at the off-farm job as equally important in providing health insurance as well as additional income. Plus the fact that, again, the

culture of the farm has changed. My mother went to the barn, helped milk cows; in the summer she would drive the tractor when we were making hay and doing that sort of thing. That was part of what she considered her responsibility, to be involved in the production side of what were doing. Well, with mechanization and the change in the size of equipment and everything today, the spouse doesn't have to get involved that way. But a lot of them want to be active and involved and so just the idea of that independence and getting away to have the job, I think, plays a role. But then the additional income does as well there. DePue: The steady paycheck.

Samuelson: A steady paycheck, because you don't always have that in farming. I was looking at some statements that were made back in 1955—that's fifty-four years ago—and one of the statements that had been recorded from there says, it won't be long before young couples are going to have to hire someone to watch their kids so they can both work. (both laugh) That's what they were saying in 1955 and so that's how things have changed. Now, urban families particularly, I think find both of the couples are working.

DePue: I suspect the next couple of minutes are going to make you a little bit uneasy, but what I want to do is to run through some of the things that you've been, accomplishments, if you will, the awards, the citations that you've received over time. I want you to reflect on just a couple of them that are especially memorable for you after I get done with the litany. I'm probably only touching the tip of the iceberg here.

Samuelson: But you'll notice that most of them are honorary so I didn't really work for them. (both laugh)

DePue: National 4-H Alumni Award, FFA American Farmer Degree. I like this one, 1985, Scandinavian-American Hall of Fame.

Samuelson: You betcha. I had to go to Minot, North Dakota, to do that.

DePue: "Yah, how you betcha."[spoken with a Scandanavian inflection – both laugh] 1994, Heifer Project International Man of the Year; 1997, I think this one is close to your heart, Jim Edgar names the Junior Livestock building at the State Fairgrounds after Orion Samuelson.

Samuelson: You know, you can get plaques on the wall but when I go to the State Fairgrounds and see my name on the building, that's a very special feeling. Now, he also told me that I would have to clean out the manure after the State Fairs as part of the deal. (both laugh)

DePue: What a deal. 1998, I imagine you remember this one as well: American Farm Bureau Distinguished Service Award with Bob Dole.

Samuelson: Senator Bob Dole and I received it the same year. That was, yeah, I was impressed.

DePue: That's exclusive company that year on both awards.

Samuelson: Yes, it really is. And we had become fairly good friends since I first met him back in 1972.

DePue: 2001, Lincoln Medal from the Lincoln Academy of Illinois; 2003, I would think another hallmark for you, the National Radio Hall of Fame, awarded by Paul Harvey[2] of all people.

Samuelson: Right.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about that one.

Samuelson: The Radio Hall of Fame is based here in Chicago. It's a national hall of fame. Every year they hold a banquet and there are generally five broadcasters who are honored from various categories, from regional program hosts to sports to manager and to a talk show host and that sort of thing. When I got the call that I had been nominated—the banquet is held in November and nominations are made in April—and I get the call from Bruce DuMont, president of the museum, and the Hall of Fame, saying, I'm calling to tell you that you've been nominated for an award. I said, What award? And he said, Well, regional host category, and I said, So who is that? ??[Do you mean, Who else is nominated? Ed.] And well, it was a personality from Los Angeles and somebody from Dallas and somebody from New York and I forget where else. I said, well, you know, I'm really honored to be nominated. I don't expect this to go any further because those are some pretty big names that I'm up against. But just as an agri-business broadcaster I'm honored to be included in a regional host category. And I forgot about it, totally forgot. Then the ballots came and people in the broadcast industry were asked to vote. I had been taught that you don't vote for yourself; I forget who I voted for, but not for myself. And I forgot about it. I thought, it's a great honor; I've been nominated and then in October I get a call from Bruce DuMont saying, "Orion, you're going into the Hall of Fame." You are the winner. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but of all the categories and all the votes of the other winners your margin was far and away the largest." I said, "I can't believe that. How many people know who I am. I serve a very niche community in serving the agricultural community. I'm astounded and deeply honored. Paul Harvey has been a friend for a long time and so the night of the presentation my wife and I sat at the table with Paul Harvey and his wife, Angel, which was a thrill unto itself. But the thing that impressed me the most that evening is that during the dinner, because

[2] Paul Harvey was an iconic broadcaster for ABC for decades. His famous line in each broadcast was, "And now, the rest of the story."

we were strictly timed—the presenter had a minute and fifteen seconds, because this was a national broadcast with Larry King, the host, and it was broadcast all across the country on radio and so he had a minute and fifteen to introduce me—I had a minute fifteen to accept. And while I never write anything, I decided, Okay, this I've got to write so I stay in the time boundary and everything. Paul, of course, does write; he pounds it out on his old clackety typewriter. During the dinner Paul reached in to his coat pocket, pulled out the script three different times, and read it. I thought boy, there's a lesson there: you can't prepare strongly enough for something. Here's Paul Harvey who is probably the most listened to radio personality in the world and he's checking his script three times. It was a truly, truly great night and one that I've never forgotten.

DePue: Well, and to be honored by your peers…

Samuelson: Yeah, yeah,

DePue: …that had to make it very special for you.

Samuelson: It did. That was a very special year. I didn't go to college, didn't have a college degree. Maybe it was a year earlier that I received the honorary degree of humane letters from the University of Illinois. So at age sixty-seven I got my first college degree.

DePue: Among other distinctions you've had, you've met every President since JFK?

Samuelson: Since Dwight Eisenhower.

DePue: Since Dwight Eisenhower, except the current one?

Samuelson: Well, I've met him when he was a senator; he was here in the office, yes.

DePue: Okay. And how about the Secretaries of Agriculture.

Samuelson: Well, Secretaries of Agriculture I have worked with as a broadcaster since the Eisenhower administration, so let me tick them off. Ezra Taft Benson, then it was Orville Freeman, then it was Cliff Hardin, then it was Earl Butz, then there was a short term about three months and I forget his name.

DePue: John Knebel?

Samuelson: John Knebel, right. Then it was Bob Bergland, and then it was Jack Block, and then it was Clayton Yeutter, and then it was Richard Lyng, and then it was Mike Espy, and it was Dan Glickman and then Ann Veneman and then Mike Johanns and then Ed Schafer and now Tom Vilsack.

DePue: Have you met Tom?

Samuelson: I have met him when he was governor. I've not met him yet in his new position. But, before that, I interviewed Henry Wallace…

DePue: Wow.

Samuelson: …who was Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture and Vice President, Charlie Brannan, who was Harry Truman's Vice President and Claude Wickard who also served in the Roosevelt administration. They all came together at Michigan State University in a special program and I was there and so… I go back to the forties really when you know, you talk to Secretaries of Agriculture.

DePue: In all of these various politicians you've met, which one is most memorable or stands out for you.

Samuelson: Earl Butz will always be memorable to me. Bob Dole is memorable to me because he was just very good at responding to questions when I would have them and he was always accessible. [President] George H.W. Bush I had the opportunity to interview in the White House and to have dinner with him and Barbara at a World Food Conference in Beijing, and he also came to a Farm Progress Show where I worked with him. As a matter of fact, that's why I voted for George [W.] Bush; I thought anybody who has parents like George H.W. and Barbara has to be quite a guy.

DePue: That's a special pair.

Samuelson: Yeah, it really is.

DePue: What's your most memorable moment in all these many years?

Samuelson: I guess probably May seventh of 1972, stepping out on the front portico of the White House on a very misty night in Washington. That was the night my wife and I were there for dinner in honor of Norman Borlaug[3] and it was my dad's birthday. And, I kind of stood out there saying, Never could dream that I'd be in the White House.

DePue: You can take a pass on this next question if you want.

Samuelson: Okay.

DePue: Your worst moment from a broadcasting standpoint.

Samuelson: From a broadcasting standpoint. Boy, I haven't (pause) I haven't had what I would consider a worst moment. You know, there have been technical

[3] Norman Borlaug, Nobel prize winner, the agronomist whose discoveries sparked the Green Revolution.

breakdowns, but I learned a long time ago: worry about the things I can control and the things I can't control, don't worry. So we'd be out at a Farm Progress Show and the phone lines would go down two minutes before air time. Hey, I can't do anything about it, so the engineer works on it and we would get it done. But other than that, I've been blessed. I've just had more fun than anybody should legally have. That's why I say, I'm seventy-five, but being Norwegian, I'm half done.

DePue: (laughs) There you go. Well, you've got another twenty or thirty years at least based on your parents.

Samuelson: Yeah, at least. Oh, yeah, absolutely.

DePue: You've already touched on this one already, but I'll ask you again at the conclusion of the interview: What do you think is the most significant change you've seen happen in agriculture since you were a young man?

Samuelson: Globalization. That's my one word answer. Because I think it has driven everything else. I think it has driven the technology. I think it has driven the genetics. I think it has driven the mechanization. Because once we went into that world market it just really… Back in 1972, to me that's when things changed and that's when the American farmer and rancher became a part of the world community in a big way. I run into people who say, Well, I'd rather go back to the old days. You can't do that; it's not going to happen, so you just learn to accept change because it's part of your life. The thing that has bothered me about agriculture over the years is that it has allowed, many times, to be led by change and seeing change, and then having to adapt to it. I keep saying it's time that we lead the change. I'm seeing that happen. I'm seeing more and more that agriculture is leading much of the change that influences how it produces and how it markets and where it markets. I'm encouraged by that. But I serve the greatest people in the world.

DePue: If you had that crystal ball in front of you, what do you see for the future of agriculture twenty or thirty years from now?

Samuelson: Well, it will be more vital than ever. World population will be larger, people have to eat. Every time I'm in the Cessna flying over this Midwest farmland, from twenty-five hundred feet as far ahead as I can see, as far off my right wing, as far off my left wing, I look at this flat prairie land and we're right in the middle of it. It's the most productive you're going to find anywhere. Technology, oh, impossible to guess where we'll be on technology. I just can't imagine what's coming down the road. But we will continue to be the most efficient agriculture on the production side and I hope we'll be the most efficient on the marketing side.

DePue: I think I know the answer to this one as well. A very similar question: the future of the family farm?

Samuelson: Family farm is really the most efficient food production unit we have on the planet. It does it far better than corporate farms. There are many corporate farms; people say well it's all corporate farming. Well, it's family corporations they've had to establish because of taxes and everything else.,. But there is nothing to equal the incentive for the family to produce than you find on a family farm. Back before the tough times of the eighties, there were ten non-farmer corporations that bought farms and added it to their business plan. And, of course, the eighties were tough times for everybody. But I kept track of those ten, and by the end of the decade only two were still involved in agriculture because I'm sure their stockholders found out that there were probably better returns on investment long term, or short term, than owning a farm. Going through the tough times, why that I'm sure influenced some of them, too. But family farm is here to stay.

DePue: What does it take to be a successful farmer today and in the future?

Samuelson: First of all, you've got to love it. You know, you've got to be as lucky as I am. What I told my kids when they were growing up, Find something you like to do so much you'll do it for nothing and then do it so well you get paid for it. And so that's the first thing. You have to love the land, you have to be concerned about environment, you have to be concerned about conservation and then you have to have a college education in management, I think is the critical part of it here. The ability to manage money because that's one of the challenges, too, that farmers have, is managing money and knowing what their production costs are. How on earth can you produce a product and market it if you don't know what it cost you to produce it? So farmers need to be better pencil pushers and probably need to spend as much time in the office managing as they do in the tractor cab.

DePue: But if you do find a person who meets all of that would you have any hesitation to encourage them to go into farming?

Samuelson: Not for a moment. As a matter of fact, in the tough times of the eighties when I would hear from parents saying, I'm going to keep my kids from farming, I'd go back to them and I'd say, "If they want to farm badly enough, you give them the best education you can, turn them loose and they'll make the same mistakes you made, but they'll learn. If they really want to do it, don't say No. Let them do it because there is a need out here for what they do."

DePue: The last question, really not a question at all. I'll give you the opportunity to say anything that's on your mind that you'd like to pass on to the future.

Samuelson: I would just say I've enjoyed the opportunity. As a matter of fact, I've told several friends, you know, I'm doing this for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and they look at me, Oh my golly, Gee, You must be somebody important.

DePue: (laughs)

Samuelson: And, that's the way I feel. So the other thing that I am delighted about is that this is being done. I know that there are many others in agriculture that are being talked to and that's great because with me you're getting my biases, prejudices and opinions and they are not always right. But if I can stimulate thinking, we can all work together to resolve some of the issues we have and this is an opportunity to do that. So, thank you.

DePue: It's been nothing but an honor for me. I think I mentioned I've been looking forward to doing this one for a long, long time and all of my colleagues have been excited about the opportunity to be able to hear what you have to say. I'm very optimistic because I'm hoping that this can reach a very wide audience of young farmers at the high school level, at the college level, communities that maybe never knew the first thing about agriculture. Hopefully, your explaining things, and I think you were, explaining things in ways that anybody can relate to and understand. So thank you very much, Orion.

Samuelson: You're welcome. (end of interviews)