

WILLIE SMITH OF ELSMORE, KANSAS

**By
Sara Porzio**

It is a warm spring day and in the middle of a lush, green pasture sits Willie Smith, 77, in a blue pickup. Today the bearings on the twenty-five foot disc need attention before Willie can start working-in fertilizer to plant milo, as soon as the ground dries out. Smith is helping from his pickup, the only way he can these days, giving directions on how to install the parts or oil the gears. His grandson, Jay Jackman, 25, listens and then completes the task. Farming today has changed a great deal since Smith began helping his father back in the 1930s. During the last seventy years or so he has not only garnered a huge database of farming and ranching know-how; he has also seen vast changes come over the Great Plains: the influx of tractors, the dying of small towns and the mass exodus of population from the area, to name a few. All of his life, Willie Smith has lived within ten miles of the old farmhouse he was born in, just east of Savonburg, in Allen County, Kansas. His grandfather homesteaded a place just a few miles from town, his father purchased land the same distance away and now his grandson takes a stab at this dying art: maintaining the family farm. This is Smith's story, and it is also the story of many others who have remained on the Plains throughout the last seventy-five years of changes.

"You didn't go to the hospital unless you were about ready to die" he recalled when asked where he was born. "I was born on January the third, 1925, at home, with my grandmother helping my mother as a midwife." Smith's family had already been in the area quite a long time before his birth. His grandfather, also William V. Smith, was a Civil War veteran wounded by a shot in the face that left him unable to work for long periods of time, though he homesteaded 160 acres outside Savonburg just after the war. Smith's father, Emmitt, rented a farm

Sara Porzio, a senior at ESU, is working on a Bachelor of Science in Education degree with a minor in geography. Although originally from southern California, she has permanently settled near Kincaid in southeast Kansas.

purchased from the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) Railroad by John Linville years before; Emmitt finally bought the place in 1938. Willie Smith the younger would follow the same pattern and purchase his own farm, a 160-acre piece on Highway 39, between Stark and Savonburg, in 1952, after renting two different farms.

Smith attended grade school at Mt. Pleasant, a small one room school house, which was closed reluctantly in 1938, along with many others in order to consolidate school services in this rural district. He went to high school in town, riding his horse to school for the first two years and then driving his first car. During his childhood and early adulthood, Smith helped his father farm and take care of their cattle. They farmed with mule power, better known as Mike and Jack. In 1937, in the middle of the Great Depression, Smith's father traded a team of horses for a tractor and plow. For the next nine years they continued to plant with the mules and the tractor, until 1946 when they turned the mules out into the pasture for good. By then the war had ended and farmers were able to purchase implements that had not been widely produced during World War II. Before this point in time Smith estimates that the average family lived on plots of land 40, 80 or 160 acres in size, but after the end of the war, he says, that's when things started to change.

Cattle ranching was different back then in his area of Allen County. Most people owned milk cows, sold the milk, bucket-fed the calves and then sold them at about two years of age. Today the cattle industry is a lot less dependent on milk breeds and it takes only fourteen to sixteen months to fatten a steer for slaughter. Smith's family not only milked their small herd, but separated off the skim milk and then shipped the cream to the Paola Butter Company via the MKT railroad. When it came time to sell the calves, local cattle buyers would make their rounds through the country and make offers on cattle. Once a deal was struck then it was time to drive (as in walk them, not load them in a trailer) the cattle down the road to the stockyards, owned by the railroad at Savonburg. The cattle would then be loaded onto trains and shipped to Kansas City to packing plants. Things are different today, as cattle are now trucked to feedlots in semi-trailers and then to rural packing plants that have migrated from their former industrial centers such as Kansas City and Chicago.

Smith says that they were paid much less for their cattle back then. Things began to change when the local sale barn replaced the traveling buyer and the railroad. The first sale barn in the area in 1933, in Iola, was only about 30 miles away. In 1947, Smith took advantage of this change and bought his first ton and a half pickup. He hauled to local feeders and sale barns until January of 1950 when he began selling cars at Tabor Motors in Chanute, Kansas.

The biggest change in local cattle ranching, according to Smith, came in the 1950s when people stopped milking and made the switch to beef breeds. Ranchers sold their livestock smaller and younger; Smith followed suit and eventually gathered a herd of sixty mixed breed beef cattle. Just two years ago he finally sold off his Angus herd, as he was unable to care for them as he once had. By the time he sold out, Smith had played the system just as others had—he took his cattle to the local sale barn where they would then be shipped to feedlots in Western Kansas.

Although he was very young during the “Dirty Thirties” Smith remembers quite a bit about those ten years. He says that he does not remember any of the dust storms reaching his area of southeastern Kansas, although he does remember the most horrible droughts he has ever experienced. What he does remember most is that his family never went hungry; they, like many others during the period, went back to subsistence agriculture, growing enough to feed themselves and not selling on the market. Additionally he says that because his family and others in the area could not find anyone to purchase their livestock, they butchered most of it themselves. It was not until the market fell to its lowest level that buyers began to purchase animals again. Smith remembers prices of \$2.00 a hundredweight for cattle and hogs, compared to today when a good average is about \$98.00 a hundredweight for cattle (Pollan 2002, 4). He also remembers the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) which paid farmers to slaughter their livestock to prevent market saturation and in many cases also to prevent the animals starving to death.

After World War II, according to Smith, farming, like the cattle industry, began to change dramatically. Prices for crops were higher than today, and he blames the current low prices on what he calls our

“manipulated market.” The government has become so involved in agriculture, Smith says, that there is no longer a true supply and demand relationship in the industry. Since the 1930s the government’s involvement has resulted in the industry becoming dependent on price supports, low interest loans and subsidies, so that by 1986, agricultural payments made up about three percent of the federal budget (Danbom 1995, 266).

It is not just the government that is responsible for the changes in the farming industry according to Smith, it is also mechanization and chemical sprays. Obviously when tractors hit farming they revolutionized everything. “Tractoring off,” as it is known, allowed farmers to farm more land quicker and reduced the number of farmers and farm hands needed to produce crops. It wasn’t the fact that many around Savonburg couldn’t afford the tractors that lessened the number of farmers in Smith’s view, it was that the older farmers were simply unwilling to make the investment when they knew they would not be farming much longer. The problem was intensified when the children went off to urban areas in search of jobs, leaving few people around who were willing to make the switch from horse to tractor power. Of course when one farmer died or moved to town, another would rent the ground because machinery gave them time to farm more. This was the start of most of the large farms in the area today. Willie Smith was at one time one of these, farming over 500 acres, running a large herd of cattle and putting up 150 acres of hay ground. Chemical sprays also freed up farmers’ time allowing them to expand even more. Instead of sitting on a tractor cultivating weeds for hours on end, they could simply spray their fields and farm much more acreage.

Though Savonburg saw telephone service about 1935 and electricity after 1948, the inevitable rural depopulation hit the area. Smith gives a local example of depopulation: “East of Savonburg when I was going to school in the 1930s, there were seventeen families that lived along the road. Today there is only one.” The farm children continued to go off to the city where opportunities awaited them; the railroad stopped passenger train service; and of course the private car turned out to be the demise of many small towns in rural Kansas. Freight and passenger trains quit stopping altogether in Savonburg in the late 1960s. Many farmers,

including Smith, sent cream on the trains until they began flying by without stopping.

Smith uses the example of another local town—Moran, which is still the largest in the eastern part of Allen County—to show how the country has changed. He remembers when Moran had three grocery stores, a theater, two tractor dealerships, a few restaurants, gas stations, and of course Talley Chevrolet, where Smith sold cars until it closed in 1984. Although Moran is bigger than the all-but-abandoned towns of Elmore and Savonburg only ten miles away, Smith feels that it too will decline.

Other changes occurred as well. Farming isn't nearly as profitable as in the past, and Smith notes that by the 1960s most farmers had to take other jobs to provide for their families. He sold cars from the 1950s into the 1990s in order to support the family, and farmed to pay for land, cattle and implements. Smith and his wife sold their 200-acre farm in 1998 and move to Elmore, the next town five miles north of Savonburg. Sitting in his living room in downtown Elmore, Smith recalls that environmental changes have taken place as well. The ground used to be covered in snow all winter long, drifting so high that "you couldn't tell where fencerows were. '79 was the last big one I remember" says Smith. Overall, he says, the climate has varied a great deal during his 60 plus years of farming: "I remember corn only growing a few feet high during the thirties."

Lifestyle changes have occurred too. Instead of going to the small town grocery store people make a trip to the larger town where they can buy more things in more stores at cheaper prices. In the 1950s Smith operated the theater in Savonburg, which only lasted a few years as bigger towns built larger theaters with more amenities than could be found in a little country theater. Even those who remain in farming today have altered their lifestyles greatly as Smith sees it. He remembers that on a typical day the family would get up at 4:00 am, milk the cows, do chores, work in the field, come in about a quarter to twelve for lunch, feed and water the horses, go back to the field at one, and quit at about a quarter to five in order to feed and water livestock and milk the cows. They would then retire to bed around eight or nine o'clock every night. Today's average farmer certainly does not follow this pattern.

When asked what period of time he would most like to relive Smith quickly answers “If I had my pick, I enjoyed the 1960s and early 1970s the best”. Why? That’s easy—because there was electricity and telephone service, but towns were not dead and one could go to Savonburg, eat at a restaurant and shop in a grocery store; and farming was more profitable than it is now. It is truly hard to imagine, looking at Willie Smith sitting in his recliner, that one person could have possibly lived through so many changes. What was once an area of plenty is now depopulated and depressed. Smith has seen farming go from being a family affair that provided so much; to an activity that requires another job to support the family and continue to farm; to today, when it simply costs too much for most people to farm. All of the knowledge Smith has about farming and rural life is a precious commodity and becoming more of one everyday as more farmers are failing and more people are leaving the countryside in search of decent jobs to support their families. The life that Willie Smith and his contemporaries lived was a truly extraordinary one, for it is almost certain that Great Plains will not provide the same farming opportunities to a new generation they once did in the past.

As Smith passes down a gravel road just east of Savonburg he rattles off the names of friends and acquaintances who occupied this piece of land or that one, and I realize that after he and others like him are gone those people, that way of life, and that time in history will not even be a memory in anyone’s mind. They will instead be another chapter in history—a nameless, faceless group represented by words in a book that can never illustrate the greatness of a time period like the eloquent, often humorous stories of those who lived back then, once upon a time.

Works Cited

- Danbom, David B. *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Pollan, Michael. “Power Steer”. *The New York Times Magazine*. March 31, 2002.