The following interview with Dan Barker was conducted on January 6, 2014. Dan Barker with his wife Becky and Father Bob own a farm outside of Edison, Ohio and produce mainly corn, soybeans, and wheat. But they also raise steers for beef production and along with that produce hay and straw. Dan and his son Derek also have a growing swine operation in which they raise hogs to be sold for show, as well as raising hogs from farrow to finish. The Barkers children are also very active in agriculture being involved in FFA and 4-h. Both Dan and his wife Becky have off the farm jobs to support the family. Dan works for the Morrow County Soil and Water Service while Becky works for the Morrow County Extension Agency, both of which are agricultural organizations.

Seth: Can you go ahead and state your name and describe the farm you operate?

Dan: I’m Dan Barker, I’m the program administrator for the Morrow Soil and Water Conservation District been here almost 27 years now. Umm do a variety of activities in terms of managing the district, educational things we do umm equipment rentals, we he have an educational center we manage, every day is a little bit different and I don’t know how much you want to know about that. As far as local or as far as my farm operation my wife and I along with my parents farm together and we farm about a total of 750 acres and about a third of that is my wife and mine umm corn, soybeans, wheat, we do have we raise a few steers every year, we umm we have a pig operation which is basically raising show hogs and feeder pigs, things like that. About 15-20 sows every year that we farrow and show and sell pigs I guess.

Seth: I know that your dad started the farm right? (Nods his head). When did he start it?

Dan: They moved here, their actually from Hancock county of course they grew up on their parents farms umm and then kinda started their own here in Morrow County in 1957 the year
they got married they moved here, so it’s been in operation since then. So of course I would be the second generation on this current farm, but I don’t know how many generations I would be actually farming cause my grandpa farmed and that kinda stuff but yeah they have been here in Morrow County Like I said since 1957.

Seth: What were some of the chores or daily things you had to do on the farm growing up?

Dan: Uhhh it varied over the years cause uhh actually I never had a dairy my dad the day I was born he sold the dairy cows so I never got into the dairy end of it but he started raising hogs back then himself farrow to finish some, I forget I can’t tell ya what number of sows, but we always had the chores of feeding and taking care of the hogs and then a few years later when I was probably a teenager he got out hogs and started buying feeder cattle and raising steers and we would get 50-60 head in at a time and had two barns and normal chores with that as far as the hay and grain and the watering and making hay in the summer and all that kind of stuff. I actually started at a very early age on the tractor, I was actually five years old the first time I drove a tractor by myself, not very far but I did and from then on mom did run tractor quite a bit and I have two sisters and they did some but when I was old enough I dunno 10-12 years old that’s what I was doing spring and fall I was on the tractor.

Seth: Going off of that what are some of the differences you see in your farm compared to the farm when you were growing up?

Dan: ummm Lot of automation, ya know things that you did by hand back then that you don’t do now. I mean anything as simple as pitching manure, now we have equipment skid steers that kind of stuff were you don’t do near the hand labor you used to do and that’s the biggest thing. And we haven’t done as much technology as in the crop end of it as far as GPS that kind of stuff,
we do use light bars for spraying and things like that but we never went to auto-steer things like that yet. I for the acres we farm I haven’t been able to pencil out and justify spending money to do it plus I always thought that would take half the fun out of farming if you don’t have to steer a tractor but I dunno maybe not.

Seth: You know what my sister does with communicating between the community and the farmers and tries to educate everybody. But umm how do you see your role in the community as a farmer? From a farmers stand point of view?

Dan: I feel I’ve been fortunate especially working here at soil and water and farming, cause I do get to talk to farmers and land owners for various reasons and it’s been interesting for me that I could learn from other farmers and what they’re doing and maybe we can do the same thing, or I’ve been able to talk to farmers of things we have done through the office here or our own farm and help them do things like that just because the communications I have with the various farmers and land owners I have throughout the year, on the farm and on the job.

Seth: I know you work this job as well, but have you ever considered changing lifestyles or moving away from the farm at all?

Dan: No id rather, I think we have talked before I’d rather walk out of here some day to farm full time, which that is my goal and my wife’s goal too she wants to do the same thing. Umm but umm this has worked out good for us for now to have a steady income off the farm even though farming really has done well the last few years here still we’ve got a livable income and we can manage that plus manage the farm and do different things that way too.

Seth: What’s been the biggest obstacle running the farm?
Dan: Yeah that’s the thing about having a full time job is time management being able to get things done, but I have been fortunate between the family my folks, plus now my son is 16 years old so he can do a lot of things that a few years ago he couldn’t do so it’s gotten better but that probably is our biggest obstacle.

Seth: alright now I’m going to ask you about the government’s role in farming a little bit. And I know this office is a government organization that you work form. Umm from a farming stand point what do you feel is the government’s role in farming right now is it too much? Is it too little? Or what needs to be done or changed?

Dan: Yeah right now government has backed out quite a bit, payments that kind of stuff umm I always said, we took government payments when they were available and we qualified for them things like that but I always said I’d like to make it off the land than getting it from the government but also if it’s there ya might as well take it that was always my opinion whether its right or wrong but umm I don’t think today’s government is involved as much as they used to be other than restrictions or limitations I guess or certain things that are coming down the pipe nothing real major yet but were uh were a minority and a majority usually rules and there’s still lots of perception to what goes on, on the farm what happens with livestock, what happens with the land and I think ya know farmers for the most part are doing a good job, their stewards good stewards ya know their taking care of the land taking care of the animals but umm there are regulations that keep being talked about that could hinder livestock production, crop production, all of that stuff just because the money or the time you have to do to meet those regulations sometimes outweighs what it’s worth. But umm as a whole I don’t really see government as a major issue right now as being involved, and a lot of farmers have walked away and not using
government assistance or payments anymore and I say I don’t blame them if you don’t need to that’s fine too.

Seth: Do you guys take subsidizes right now?

Dan: Yeah, yeah we do they’re minimal anymore compared to a few years ago, but we sign up every year and we are even in a couple special programs we’ve done cover crops with they help us to, we don’t make money doing it but it helps offset the cost of some things we have been doing on our farm.

Seth: So they are more of somewhat a small bonus to kinda help out?

Dan: Yeah an incentive just to help you get started. This one program were in its five years and we got one more year in that program and I’m still gonna continue what we’re doing even if we don’t get that money cause it’s something that it helped me figure out how I wanted to do it and it sold me on it, on that particular practice at least.

Seth: Okay, now we are gonna move on to the role of women on the farm. Growing up I guess did your mom play a very big role on the farm?

Dan: Yeah like I said till I was old, I guess my sisters weren’t really interested in the farm and they’re both a little bit older than me but they did help of course. But mom drove tractor did all that stuff, helped with animals, helped feed, do whatever until...and if you ask her she will say until the day I was able to do it then she was done. But she wasn’t really done she was still able to do it. But she didn’t drive the tractor a lot anymore, but yeah growing up she did a lot yeah.

Seth: and you said your sisters helped out some too?

Dan: Some yeah, yeah.
Seth: And I know Becky does but I have to ask does Becky play a role on the farm today?

Dan: Oh yeah! She is the boss nah (laughs). We work together in a lot of ways, She’s uhhh with the animals She’s got a real knack for animals especially young ya know were breeding and having animals born on our farm and getting young baby calves she starts them, that’ a woman’s knack I swear it’s the mothering thing ya know and we have had really good success because she does do that, and she does a lot more than that too I mean.

Seth: Does Becky do most of the book keeping on the farm or do you handle it, or is it split even?

Dan: The farm stuff I do keep, the household stuff she keeps. So that’s kinda how we’ve got it worked out.

Seth: I’m asking about women because through some of my research sometimes some of the farmers looking at other interviews that people have done, the farmers will say women don’t play as big of a role maybe physically but then when they go back and look and see who is doing the gopher job, who is doing the book keeping, they realize oh well it’s my wife and that’s who is keeping the farm afloat so that’s why I’m asking.

Dan: Yeah, and that’s in our situation especially when mother was younger she did a lot more than that and Becky still does today too and of course she works full time too but still finds time to help do everything on the farm too.

Seth: I know Derek is interested in being involved in the farm but what about Kayla has she shown any interest?
Dan: Some, not as much. She likes the livestock too, she has talked about veterinary that type of things but she is only 13 at this point, which time will go by quick but umm yeah she has shown interest in the farm I don’t know where its gonna end up even Derek I dunno where is gonna end up cause the swine is really what he enjoys and uhh I know he wants to have some future in the swine operation so whether we expand more or do something else which we have done a little bit the last couple years to help build something else for him to have, time will tell I guess. But they have both shown some interest yes.

Seth: I know Becky is involved with the farm, and so was your mom, and Kayla is now but outside of that how do you feel women are perceived on the farm or in agriculture from the general farming community or public?

Dan: I think I mean just locally, they are a big part of it I mean without them like you said they help keep it afloat help keep things whether it’s the smaller end jobs or actually a lot of them run equipment which they can do and do a lot of things so they are very important and I think actually locally they are perceived as one of all of us I think for the most part

Seth: Okay now I’m going to move on to I guess the corporate farming or Movers and Shuckers. Umm I know there has been a lot of controversy going on with them people have different opinions, some people like them some people don’t. But I guess how do you feel that they have affected the farming area and this community, or maybe more specifically smaller farms, or land owners too?

Dan: Yeah and I’m not gonna say good bad or indifferent about them, cause I don’t know them personally. And I know they are offering higher dollar rent is what we hear and paying it as far as that goes. So that has affected the overall rent prices locally cause they are willing to pay more
and can pay more. I don’t know how much totally its affected it, ya know we haven’t been directly affected by them per say but ya know I think I was gonna say I think he is almost a fad in some ways he may come and go I dunno he may get tired and bored of farming ya know and he may not I don’t know maybe he will choose to stay and he will own half the county before it’s all over with (laughs). But I can’t sit here and say anything good or bad about them cause ya know I said I just don’t know them personally, but it has affected rental prices is the biggest thing I can see that its affected.

Seth: Going off of that in terms of agribusiness ya know the larger corporations like maybe a Tyson chicken or something like that, do you feel that those have gotten bigger while family farms have gotten smaller or has it stayed balanced?

Dan: I don’t… I guess just off the cuff I don’t think it’s really changed too much. The good farms the good family farms no matter what the size are making it, especially here again the last couple years. And this here this local area has been good crop wise and economy wise so I don’t see them the bigger corporate farms affecting locally too much at this time.

Seth: I looked at the numbers I think it was on extensions website that the number of farmers has gone down but the average size has gotten bigger so I was just trying to figure out what’s factoring in to that, if people are just getting older or what.

Dan: Yeah, and I think that there being less farmers that’s probably cause of retirement or age ya know. And a lot of second generation or well not second generations but next generations don’t want to farm they didn’t, they may have grew up on a farm but went off and did something else and didn’t come back to the farm which ya know maybe there wasn’t the opportunity for them to come back home and then in the long run once that older generation is ready to retire or whatever
they have sold the farms or if the kids have inherited it they have sold the farm if they don’t want to be involved in it so I think that’s probably why that is. But I think family farms in this area are strong really.

Seth: Those are all the questions I have so unless you want to add anything else about family farms or growing up on a farm?

Dan: It’s a good way of life. I’m glad my kids are doing it, I’m glad that we are in this community, I’m glad that they get the opportunity to do what they have done, it to me teaches a lot of respect, umm whether it’s for other people, other animals, or whatever. The hands on things you learn just because it has to be done is amazing and it’s, like a say responsibility is the biggest thing it teaches them too, and I wouldn’t wanna have it any other way (laughs).

Seth: I agree. Thank you.

Dan: Yupp.