

Fighting for Farmers, (Bio) Fuel, and Hemp, Willie Nelson is Still Rolling

By Melanie Moore



Photo by Brian Fitzsimmons

Driving into Willie Nelson's ranch, off Highway 71 northwest of Austin, is like driving onto a movie set.

Actually, it is a movie set; it's been used in commercials, films, and TV spots. Cars leave dusty clouds behind as they wind around dirt roads right into the middle of an Old West town, a "main street" complete with saloon, church, and other buildings as well as corrals of horses. Inside the saloon, the wooden floorboards are uneven in places—they probably make a cool cowboy noise with your steps if you wear boots. But running shoes navigate the terrain just as well, which is what Willie Nelson had on, with workout shorts and a tee shirt, as he and his wife, Annie, welcomed guests into the saloon. A bar runs along one side, with a

large flat-screen TV at the opposite end where FOX news was on but muted. The walls are decorated with old posters and photos, many signed by the legends in the photos with Nelson. In addition to a pool table, there is a round poker table, with chips and cards at the ready. Comfortable swivel chairs—on wheels that can get stuck in the uneven floorboards—surround the table. Nelson leans back in one and Annie perches on a bar stool behind him.

A few weeks prior to visiting with *Austin Fit Magazine*, Nelson had had to leave Colorado where he was on tour.

"Oh [my health is] all right," he said. "I smoked cigarettes. I drank quite a bit. Emphysema."

"You go up to altitude," Annie interjected.

"And I woke up and I couldn't breathe," he said. "But other than that I'm in pretty good shape." At 79, Nelson is a second degree black belt in tae kwon do.

"I ran to stay in shape," he said. "You remember Charles Atlas and dynamic tension; it's what Bruce Lee does. So I noticed a comparison between mental, physical, spiritual evolution. I think martial arts are one of the best things a person can get into. Back in Nashville, I got into kung fu; kicking and gauging. We used to go out and sign up kids to take kung fu lessons. It was a heck of a lot of fun."

In terms of diet, the Nelsons "eat clean" and get their food from local farmers' markets when they are on the road.

"I eat six times a day," he said. He eats bacon, eggs, and potatoes.

“Look, it actually works,” Annie said. “It matters that it’s clean.” She makes a point to know the source of the foods they eat, rather than just buying whatever is in a store.

“The food that turns into energy,” Nelson said. “I grew up on eggs and potatoes. I can get by on [that]. If there’s some greens out there, that’s good. But that’s what I eat. Biscuits and gravy if you’ve got it.”

“For 25 years, Farm Aid has been [helping local farmers],” said Nelson, wasting no time diving into the subject he and his wife are passionate about. “And we’re still losing a lot of farms. At one time we had eight million family farmers; now we’ve got less than a half a million.” Nelson said the change is mostly in the Farm Belt, an area generally defined as the Midwest and central plains of the United States.

The family farmers are struggling because of the drought and because of the competition from what Annie Nelson termed “industrial ag.”

“Look at your food in the morning for breakfast,” Nelson said. “Most everything you’re eating came from 1,500 miles away when it could have been grown right over there. Get a local farmer to grow your bacon and eggs and your chickens, whatever you need in your garden. But trucking it 1,500 miles does a lot of damage to the environment and the price and everything. So sustainable, local agriculture is what Annie’s involved in a lot, and us too.”

“The U.S. is the only place that doesn’t have some sort of ban on GMO or control over GMO or labeling on GMO,” Annie said. (GMO is the acronym for genetically modified organism). “They have a terminator seed... they’ve patented something that’s a plant,” she said, referring to Monsanto, the herbicide and seed conglomerate.

“A farmer can’t keep his seeds from this year and use them again next year like he used to,” Nelson said. In addition to the genetically modified seeds which the company prohibits customers from saving from year to year, Monsanto, an American multinational agricultural biotechnology company, also makes pesticides which, according to Nelson, farmers are required to use.

“If I’m a farmer and I go to the bank and I want to borrow some money to do my crop next year, they’ll say, ‘Well, okay, but you’ve got to put so much pesticide, so much chemical, so much fertilizer on each acre or we’re not going to loan you the money. That way we know you’re going to get enough yield to pay us back.’”

“It’s really wrong,” Annie said, referring to Monsanto’s seed patent protection practices. She referenced the famous case of Percy Schmeiser v Monsanto which has become the iconic story of an agricultural David versus Goliath. Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer, was sued by Monsanto for having used their seeds without paying for them. Schmeiser held that the seeds had blown over from another farm; he had always been an organic farmer and not only didn’t use GMO seeds, he didn’t want them contaminating his fields. Over a decade later, after an appellate court battle, instead of paying Monsanto the \$400,000 they said he owed, Monsanto paid him \$660, which was the cost of removing Monsanto’s “Roundup ready” canola oil seeds from his land.

On its website, Monsanto has a page titled “Why Does Monsanto Sue Farmers who Save Seeds?” The company states that, “Since 1997, we have only filed suit against farmers 145 times in the United States.” The statement points out that Monsanto has patented

seeds and “spends more than \$2.6 million per day in research and development.” The statement continues with tautological explanations of the link between a company’s patents and revenue.

Monsanto has developed a seed that is resistant to Roundup, a powerful herbicide also sold by Monsanto. According to a June 2003 article in *Scientific American*, “Until now, most health studies have focused on the safety of glyphosate [the active ingredient in Roundup], rather than the mixture of ingredients found in Roundup. But in the new study, scientists found that Roundup’s inert ingredients amplified the toxic effect on human cells—even at concentrations much more diluted than those used on farms and lawns.”

“It went from weaponry to the food we eat,” said Ronda Rutledge, Executive Director of the Sustainable Food Center in Austin. Rutledge was commenting on Monsanto, a maker of Agent Orange, which, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs, is “a blend of tactical herbicides the U.S. military sprayed from 1962 to 1971 during Operation Ranch Hand in the Vietnam War to remove trees and dense tropical foliage that provided enemy cover.”

“The manufacturing companies [making Agent Orange] included Diamond Shamrock Corporation, Dow Chemical Company, Hercules, Inc., T-H Agricultural & Nutrition Company, Thompson Chemicals Corporation, Uniroyal Inc. and Monsanto Company, which at the time was a chemical manufacturer. Monsanto manufactured Agent Orange from 1965 to 1969,” according to Monsanto’s website.

The big issue, and the focus of worldwide “Occupy Monsanto” events in September 2012, is about labeling GMO foods.

Proposition 37 (read the text at www.carighttoknow.org/read_the_initiative) is on the November 6 ballot in California and is being watched very closely by farmers, grocers, and consumers around the country because, as Rutledge said, “Many times, as California goes, so goes the country.” Her question, and the question of many organic and sustainable farm advocates and health-conscious consumers is, “If [GMO foods] aren’t bad, then why not tell us what’s in [them]?”

The battle heated up over the summer with Monsanto spending \$4.2 million to defeat California’s Proposition 37, according to Truthout, a nonprofit organization “dedicated to providing independent news and commentary on a daily basis.” The Sacramento Bee newspaper characterized the situation as “a battle between organic farmers and food manufacturers on one side and, on the other, conventional grocery store brands and the biotech companies that make some of their ingredients.” The paper listed parent companies for Cheerios, Chef Boyardee, Nestle, Coke, and Pepsi, as well as Monsanto, DuPont, and Bayer that make pesticides and genetically modified seeds as those on the “no” side that had raised \$32.5 million. On the organic side, the paper listed manufacturers including Lundberg’s, Nature’s Path, Clif Bar, and Amy’s Kitchen who have raised \$4.3 million in support of the proposition. Whole Foods endorsed the proposition, but most grocery stores are opposed. It is a heated topic.

“I’m not willing to kill my child,” said Annie. “It’s not just low energy [food], it’s toxic. I need to know [what’s in the food I feed my family]. It’s still not okay. It seems to be more expensive [to buy organic produce]. ... As long as it’s poor people, there will be poor kids dying. We need to force

[GMO producers] to label the fruit,” Annie said. “When you educate people, they don’t mind spots on their [organic] food. Why would you give your kid a piece of fruit that even a bug wouldn’t want to eat?”

In addition to their opposition of GMOs and “industrial ag,” the Nelsons are also active in supporting alternatives to petroleum and petrochemical-based products. Their buses and trucks run on biodiesel.

“The diesel engine was invented to run on peanut oil,” Annie explained. “It was modified to be able to use petroleum-based diesel fuel.” They get their biodiesel from a variety of sources. “We get it from restaurants,” she said. “We haul it back to the plant.” The oil used in fryers at restaurants can be used for biodiesel fuel rather than being thrown out after use. “That oil would end up in landfills or animals.”

“There’s no need to go around starting wars for oil,” Nelson said.

Nelson has formed Willie Nelson Biodiesel Company to distribute his own blend of biodiesel fuel called BioWillie. It’s available at various locations in Texas and along the Eastern Seaboard.

“We’re talking about doing something on the Lincoln highway, 180, as you move from San Francisco to New York,” he said. “The government wants to make that a biodiesel highway. It’s the 100th anniversary of the Lincoln Highway and they’re trying to do the whole highway with alternative fuel, which is a great idea. And build plants along the way. They have the government supporting that so we’re going to do a tour there. We’re going to get Neil Young to start it out in San Francisco and bring it on. And we’ll get Jimmy Johnson or Luke [Bryan] somewhere along the way. Vegas along the way. We’ll do a final one in either New York

or Washington and promote the whole thing with biodiesel.”

“The Obama administration facilitated it,” Annie said. “This has been a while, so now from Times Square to Lincoln Park in San Francisco you can get a minimum of B20 on a trip.”

“We’re trying to coordinate it with my 80th birthday,” Nelson said, “which is April 30 next year. Somewhere along the way we’ll do a birthday bash, try to tie it all together.

Nelson is known for his support of hemp, and he notes that drafts of the Declaration of Independence were likely written on hemp. Much of the paper used in the 18th century was made of hemp, as well as sails, rope, and many other products.

“Anything that used to be made of hemp is now made out of chemicals,” he said. “There’s a huge push and drive in the States to bring back hemp. You can buy the material. You can bring the seed. There’s a huge market we’re not getting any money from, and it’s not just the drug. There’s a lot more involved.”

In addition to his music and activism, Willie Nelson has written a new memoir which will hit shelves November 13, *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die*, from William Morris Publishers.

What would Willie like *Austin Fit Magazine* readers to know? “Family farmers kick ass. Find your farmer, not sharecroppers that grow for Monsanto.”

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Layout by Madie Leon Riley for portfolio purposes only.