

**JOHNNY HENSGENS**  
**Farmers Rice Milling Co.—Lake Charles, LA**

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Date: September 11, 2007  
Location: Farmers Rice Milling Co.—Lake Charles, LA  
Interviewer: Sara Roahen  
Length: 48 minutes  
Project: Southern Boudin Trail & Southern Gumbo Trail

**[Begin Johnny Hensgens-Boudin Interview]**

00:00:00

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, September 11, 2007. I'm in Lake Charles—Charles, Louisiana with Mr. Johnny Hensgens. And if I could get you to say your name and your birth date, we'll get started.

00:00:16

**Johnny Hensgens:** It's Johnny Hensgens, and birthday is December 28, 1948.

00:00:22

**SR:** So you don't pronounce the 's' at the end?

00:00:25

**JH:** Really I guess not. *[Laughs]*

00:00:28

**SR:** Okay. And can you just start—explain to me where we are, and the different businesses that are involved here in this spot?

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**JH:** We have a—this company is owned by an individual; it's pretty well totally integrated. We—we actually produce the rice; we process the rice; we process the hulls that come off the

rice and make electricity with it. So we're pretty much totally integrated in our—in this—in our farm. The farm has approximately 10,000 acres of farmland. We produce about 2,000 to 2,500 acres a year in rice on the farm. We have—plant soybeans; we plant some wheat and mostly—most—a lot of the property is all pasture with cattle. We have cattle on probably 70-percent of the property. It's in a rotation with the rice. Whenever the rice is not planted, we put cattle on it.

00:01:40

**SR:** And so really—so you're a farm and a mill that sustains itself—that produces its own electricity to do the work of milling. Is that right?

00:01:53

**JH:** Right. We produce electricity for the mill, and plus we actually sell electricity on the grid. So we—we produce way more than we actually use, so we have—. But in my—my company is just with the rice part. We farm about 1,000 acres a year of rice on—with the farm on the property that's owned by the landowner. It's pretty complicated but it's—it's all setup for whatever purpose, but it's all—. We have the farm that farms on the land company, and the land company is owned by the same owner that owns the rice mill and electric plant.

00:02:34

**SR:** And is there one name for this place?

00:02:40

**JH:** The Powell Group is the parent company for all our companies. My company is Powell Farm Partners. We have Excalibur Land Company. We have B. H. Timber. And we have Agri-Electric Power and Farmers Rice Milling Company.

00:02:57

**SR:** And the timber part—is that involved at all in the rice production?

00:03:01

**JH:** No, the timber is all separate. It's a separate entity.

00:03:06

**SR:** I'd like to ask you a little bit before I get into the process of what goes into farming rice and making it ready for sale—can you describe to me a little bit about how you generate your own electricity; what—what you use for that?

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**JH:** They burn the rice hulls in a turbine co-generation plant. I would have to get someone else to—to help with the electricity. That—that's not my company.

00:03:37

**SR:** But it's the rice hulls?

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**JH:** The rice hulls that are taken when the rice is brought in and the hulls are removed. The hulls are removed and they're—they're ground to a fine powder, and that's what's sent over to the electric plant where they burn it to produce electricity.

00:03:53

**SR:** And so I guess you couldn't do that if everybody decided to eat brown rice, or—or do you take the hulls off the brown rice too?

00:04:02

**JH:** Right, right. That's the first process, is the removal of the hulls. The second process—and that's when you—we see—that's when you have brown rice, and the second process in the milling industry is to remove the bran from the rice and make the white rice.

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**SR:** Is that process of producing electricity from the hulls—is that very common here in Louisiana or elsewhere?

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**JH:** No, I think we're the only plant in Louisiana that—that produces electricity, and we buy hulls from other mills in the area to—rather than them having to dispose of it in a landfill, their hulls in a landfill, they bring them here and they're—they're burnt here.

00:04:47

**SR:** And why does everybody—why doesn't everybody do that? Is it an expensive endeavor in the beginning?

00:04:52

**JH:** It's expensive in the beginning and it hasn't been—when the plant was built they were expecting electric prices, I think, to go up more than they have, and it hasn't been a—a very profitable venture. The—there's more income to be received from the ash, from the burning of the hulls, than there is from the—from the production of electricity.

00:05:19

**SR:** So there's income that comes from the ash?

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**JH:** Right. The ash is used in several different industries. We're using it in the steel industry as an insulator at the steel mills, and then it—lately they've gotten into the filtration business, using it to filter for different processes and different needs.

00:05:45

**SR:** Okay, okay. So you sell some of the ash to do that?

00:05:46

**JH:** A hundred-percent of the ash is sold. There's no—when—when the rice comes in here there's nothing that leaves, that's not being used for something.

00:05:56

**SR:** It's kind of like we were talking about before—when you use everything from the tail to the snout of the pig.

00:06:00

**JH:** That's right. The same thing with the—with the boudin and the hogshead cheese, and the—and the rice industry is—I mean this plant uses every bit of the rice. There's no waste.

00:06:14

**SR:** It's a pretty industrious culture around here in general.

**JH:** Yes. It's been—this company has been in existence, I think a little over 100 years they've been in—in the rice business, and then in the mill industry. They've owned a mill for 80 years, I think.

00:06:31

**SR:** And how long have you been involved here?

00:06:35

**JH:** I came to work here in 1995. Before 1995 I was farming on my own and the opportunity came. They—they revamped this company on how it was operating and they were in need of a farm manager, so the opportunity came and I came in 1995.

00:06:52

**SR:** And what is your title here exactly?

00:06:55

**JH:** Director of Farming Operations.

00:06:59

**SR:** And what—what did you farm when you were farming on your own?

00:07:02

**JH:** The same thing. I had the cattle, the rice, and soy beans, and a little bit of wheat. We—it's like we talked about earlier: the—the other product, the other crops other than rice, are mainly whenever the prices dictate that it's—it's profitable. We can't compete with some of the normal soybean and wheat producing states. We can only compete when it's—the rice—the prices of the commodity are adequate to pay our expenses.

00:07:33

**SR:** You're talking about with the rotation crop?

00:07:37

**JH:** Exactly, right.



00:07:39

**SR:** And does your farm still exist?

00:07:41

**JH:** It does. I've sold my share, my interest in it, to two partners that I had when I was farming. They've—they've taken over the—what I've had—what I had. My share.

00:07:56

**SR:** Well you're definitely the right man to ask then, since you have done it on your own for a long time: can you sort of start at the beginning of the process of planting rice and take me, you know, generally sort of like the film that we watched a little while ago of the different steps until you get to the finished product? [*Cell Phone Rings*] So I was asking you about the process.

00:08:24

**JH:** Yes, the process. I guess I'll bring you through an entire year. We're—we start—basically this time of year we'll go in, and stuff that was fallow that had pasture for cattle, we'll plow it starting now and get it prepared and have it—try to have it prepared good enough to where, when we go through the winter, it will be easy to plant in the spring of the following year. Now we've—we've changed our practice. We—we do some minimum till planting where we actually plow it now and don't do anything except plant it in the—in the spring. We'll just run a drill and plant it and do no other field work, which is you know something that's changed in the last, I guess, five to ten years. But it's really—it seems to work real well. It saves on fuel, it saves on time, and we—very few acres do we actually work more than one time in the spring. We may

run one—one pass with a field cultivator and then drill it, or one pass with the field cultivator and flood and plant with a—water-seed it with an airplane. And that's dependent on the type of soil. We have some light soils that we can drill with a—with the tractor, and we have heavy soils where it—we can't drill; we have to water-seed.

00:10:01

**SR:** Can you tell me what you mean by drill?

00:10:01

**JH:** Drill is a mechanical, just a mechanical piece of equipment pulled behind a tractor that actually inserts the seed into the—into the ground. And it—we try to put it in the moisture where it'll—it'll come up on its own from having enough moisture.

00:10:23

**SR:** And—and so the alternative is, if the ground is too heavy, then you—you flood the field and just sprinkle the seed into the water?

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**JH:** Right, sprinkle the seed in the water. We'll sprinkle dry seed into the water, let it sit approximately 48-hours to start the germination process, and then remove the water. And sometimes you have to refill it, put water back on to keep the germination process going to get the roots established and stuff, but most—most of the time you can just plant it and cut the water off in 48-hours, and it will peg its roots and—and come along from that point.

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**SR:** And is there—is one—is either way more effective?

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**JH:** Again it goes back to the soil type. When you have the—the lighter soils you can do the water-seeded, but it's probably a little more expensive to apply the water and plant it than it is to—. Especially now since we've gone to the minimum till, where we just maybe run—run a field cultivator and a drill. It's not—it's very little land preparation. Years—in the past you used to have to work the ground real good, get a real good seed-bed and plant it. And the main difference is the type of equipment we use. The drills that we have now are basically—can put the seed in the soil in any type of soil, any type of you know—if it's hard or if it's soft or whatever, you can adjust it to plant it, where we didn't have those types of drills in the past.

00:11:58

**SR:** Where does the water come from that you use to flood the fields?

00:12:02

**JH:** We have both surface water, which is out of the bayous or the drainage ditches, and we have groundwater, which is pumped out of the ground.

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**SR:** And we were talking earlier, and in the meeting someone said that the surface water—once it floods the fields it's a lot cleaner than it was in the bayous and the drainage ditches. Is that because you filter it somehow?

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**JH:** Well I think the—just passing through the—the rice, you know going through the rice, the rice itself filters it and the sediments—it settles out before it goes into the—discharges into the—when it discharges into the Gulf, you know. It—it's just a process where you short-stop it before it goes straight into the Gulf; you take the sediment and stuff. If there's runoff from above you pick it up and use it as a—and the rice itself filters it.

00:12:59

**SR:** Okay, that makes sense. In Asia, we were talking earlier about how in Asia there's a lot of—there's mostly hand-planting of seedlings. Is that because of the kind of rice they grow, or is that because they don't have the equipment that we have here?

00:13:17

**JH:** I think, yeah, it's—they don't have the equipment we have, and they have a completely different system. They—they have, one family may have one to one and a half acres, where our average farm is probably 700 to 2,000 acres. So it—it was no way that we could be able to plant with transplanting the seeds, you know. We wouldn't have—we don't have enough labor. We'd have—we'd have to go to the mechanized system, and we're mechanized in that we're a lot more efficient than they are too, I would think. You know we—we can produce more per acre for not

necessarily a cheaper price than they could do it, because theirs is all hand done. Their—it's all labor intensive where we're more, I guess, equipment intensive.

00:14:13

**SR:** Okay. So once—once the rice is planted—you said that you do that in the spring. Like around what time in the spring in Louisiana?

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**JH:** We—we usually start mid-March. March 15 is probably the beginning time, and the optimum time is March 15<sup>th</sup> to probably May 15<sup>th</sup>. Once you get to May 15<sup>th</sup> you're getting to a point where the—the yield will drop significantly 'cause it's later; more heat from you know the summertime; the plants are—have a hard time surviving—not necessarily surviving but producing the carbohydrates needed to produce the rice crop because of the heat that's—. And especially down south where we are, the nighttime temperature is usually, doesn't cool off enough to let the plant rejuvenate its carbohydrate production, so—.

00:15:13

**SR:** And so are you saying that you harvest in May, or you would only plant until May?

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**JH:** We—we spread the planting out usually in our—on our farm we try to plant—start the 15<sup>th</sup> of March if the weather conditions are right, and we'll try to get through the 15<sup>th</sup> of April. And then only if we've had adverse weather—either cold weather or a wet season or whatever— will

we plant, have to plant later than that. And we try to get it—the earlier you get it, the better yield you make. The harvest begins on the first planted rice, and the reason we spread it out also is because to spread out the harvest. We couldn't harvest it all at one time, so we have to plant it at different stages to be able to harvest at different stages. We don't want to—you don't want the crop to remain in the field when it's ready to harvest because it deteriorates in the field. So we—we usually start about the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, and it goes through the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of August. This year we've had so much rain for such an extended time we're still actually harvesting some—quite a bit of rice in this area. And it was both 'cause it was planted late, because of the cold temperatures we had in the—around Easter time; plus the—all the rain. We cannot you know—we maybe can operate one hour a day because—with the harvest—because of the showers. We get showers every day.

00:16:50

**SR:** Hmm. And does that—because the rice has been in there longer, does—how does that affect it?

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**JH:** Oh definitely the quality of—of the grain is deteriorated. The—I guess the optimum moisture to harvest rice is, say, 19-percent moisture down to 18—19 and a half to 18-percent moisture. The stuff we're harvesting now is probably running about 13-percent moisture, which is almost dried, and it's dried by the sun and it—what happens, it fractures. The—the sun and the heat, when it gets dry will fracture the grain and it will break up a lot more. It—it won't have the pretty white whole grains; it will be a lot of broken. And broken are not lost. They're used

because it's used in the brewing industry and it's used in the feed industry. It's used in a lot of places, but the price difference between whole grains and broken is—is sometimes, it's significant. It's—not right now it's not a big difference in it, but it still makes a difference, you know, and with the final price you get for the grain—for the crop.

00:18:07

**SR:** So I know when I'm driving, you know along the highways in Louisiana, the rice plant—I know what that looks like. It's sort of a grassy, you know—from the car it will look sort of, like sort of a long grassy green plant. Where is the actual rice on that plant?

00:18:24

**JH:** Well you'll—you probably just didn't notice at the time. In other words, it will go from probably 80 to 90—85 to 90 days it will be in the grassy stage where it would look like just a plant. At 90 days after planting it'll—it'll produce a head, a seed head that—I may be able to find some for you to see—where it actually turns from green to straw colored yellow. You know it actually looks like a—a wheat plant after it—the rice is seeded out. It'll come—the head will come out, the—the pinnacles on the head, which are the individual grains, all flower and it'll—it's pretty much self-pollinating. In other words, one plant will pretty much pollinate itself. So it'll go—from the heading out stage it'll go to the fill, which is the dough stage, where it actually goes from a blank seed to filling in the seed. It'll go to dough, and then it'll go to a hard stage when you—when you harvest when the moisture comes out.

00:19:48

**SR:** How do you spell that word—dough?

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**JH:** D-o-u-g-h.

00:19:53

**SR:** Oh dough, okay. [*Laughs*]

00:19:54

**JH:** Yeah, yeah.

00:19:54

**SR:** And how many of those, I guess, grains will be on a plant?

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**JH:** On a—on a head, which is—there's multiple heads on a plant and that varies with the variety. You may have—one seed will produce maybe 10 shoots, and the 10 shoots, each one of them will have a—a seed head in which is—and on the seed head there's probably 135 to 150 kernels per seed head.

00:20:31

**SR:** Wow. I'd like to get a look at that up close.



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**JH:** Well you can go. I'm getting ready to go harvest some rice. You can see it when we go out there.

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**SR:** Oh that would be great. Yeah, I clearly didn't know that I was passing rice once it was looking like wheat. And so at any point during the—the growing period, do you flood the fields, or do the—do the fields stay real moist or—?

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**JH:** Yeah, the fields are flooded—again, it depends on the type of system you use. If you're using—excuse me—the water seeded—or the dry seeded, the dry seeded, you'll leave it approximately six weeks from the time of planting to when you put the water on. Once you put the water on, it's on 24/7 until it's cut off for harvest. It's cut off about 14 days prior to harvest, and the water is mainly on there just as a—a preventative for grass. In other words, when you put soil in an aquatic stage there's—no grass will grow. So you plant—put the water on it up until it's time for the—at the heading. At the heading time it needs the water to fill the—the seed, but prior to that the water—the only use of the water is to keep the field clean and keep it free of grass.

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**SR:** And a byproduct of that, we learned earlier this morning, is that it becomes a nice place for birds to hang out.

00:22:03

**JH:** Right, and the birds are there year-round. In other words, when we plant we have birds. When we're growing throughout the year we'll have birds, but the majority of the birds come in after harvest when we have fields flooded, like during the wintertime. A lot, especially the migratory birds, will come in after harvest.

00:22:27

**SR:** What's—is there a certain kind of bird that's prominent in a rice field or—or not?

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**JH:** Yeah, I guess you have the egrets; you have the, I don't know what the scientific names—we have names for them: groesbecks and beckcraws, and we have black mallards. Ducks winter over this area. And then after harvest we have the—all the ducks come in, ducks and geese; we have flights of ducks and geese come in from the north.

00:23:03

**SR:** And I'm interrupting the production cycle a little bit, but at what point, I know that crawfish and rice go together in this state a lot. It's an alternate crop or a rotation crop. At what point would you put crawfish in there?

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**JH:** Okay, the crawfish are—are seeded into the rice fields, the growing rice fields usually, sometime in June or July. They're taken from the existing ponds and transplanted into a rice field, and then when the rice is—when the rice is harvested, the water is cut off and the crawfish will go into the ground at that point. And they'll bury in and they'll—they'll produce their eggs, or their reproductive process, and then in the—around—just like I was telling you earlier, we have a second cutting of the rice. Well if they have crawfish, they don't harvest that second cutting. They'll re-flood the fields, say in October, and use the stubble that was left from the first crop as the feed for the crawfish. So that's where it—it comes in handy for, you know—they clean up a field. If you have noxious weeds or whatever, they'll clean up just about everything in the—in the field, when the crawfish start coming out and feeding.

00:24:26

**SR:** And so the harvesting of the rice doesn't hurt the crawfish at all?

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**JH:** No, 'cause they'll go in the ground. They'll bury—burrow their-selves into the ground.

00:24:36

**SR:** And the fact that the crawfish are sort of eating off of the—the green part of the rice while it's growing, that doesn't hurt the rice?

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**JH:** It's—they don't really eat on the green part while it's growing. They eat more in the—I think in—I'm not an expert in this because we have, we don't produce any crawfish, but I think it's the algae and stuff is a lot of what they feed on, you know. They—they feed on the decaying straw and stuff, the byproduct of the decaying process, so the green rice is not really used. It's when you re-flood it and the straw and the—the plants are there that have not regenerated, and they start rotting and the—the crawfish eat off the decaying plants.

00:25:29

**SR:** Okay. What does—in optimum conditions, when do you harvest? What will the rice look like? What's the sign that it's ready?

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**JH:** It'll turn to a—a golden color. And it'll—you'll have—when it heads out it'll be green, and it'll turn from green to a golden color, and when it's probably 95-percent of the kernels are that straw color is when you'll start harvest.

00:26:00

**SR:** And you mentioned during our talk that sometimes you'll find red rice growing in there. What does that mean, red rice?

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**JH:** Red rice is a—it's a noxious weed for us. It's actually a rice, but it's—it comes up—it falls off. It'll get on the ground and it'll survive for years and years on the—in the soil surface, and

when you plant the following—the next time you plant it'll come back and start growing, and it'll actually—it'll actually shade out all of the good rice, and you will have nothing to harvest. Now the new technology we have is we have some products that we can spray on our rice fields that'll actually not kill the rice, but it will kill the red rice, and that has really benefited us in the—in the recent past. It's only been about five years that we've had this. Before that it was—we were talking about the water seeded; it was almost 100-percent water seeded prior to that because the water seeded rice, you throw the seed out; you cut it off for 48-hours, and within a week you re-flood the field to its—and it does the same thing we talked about with the grass. It—it keeps—as long as the soil doesn't crack after you've planted the rice, as long as the soil doesn't crack it doesn't allow oxygen into the ground. It'll—the rice, the red rice or the grass or any noxious weeds will not come back, so—. And that's the system we used up until the last, probably five or six years, whenever this new technology was available to us.

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**SR:** Is red rice edible, and do any cultures grow it on purpose?

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**JH:** It—there's really no difference. The problem is red rice—you usually can't bring it to harvest. It'll fall off before you harvest it. It'll—it just falls on the ground, and then you lose it. You don't lose it because it stays in the ground forever. But you can't—but if you do, you know, harvest some—it's green, it hasn't fallen off yet—there's really no difference as far as the—the quality or the taste of it, I don't think, than regular white rice. It just has an off-color to it; it's not a pretty white grain, and it definitely affects your value when you sell it because of the—you

know, most of our customers all want pretty white rice, and if you have that in there that's when they have to use the color sorters or whatever to take it out.

00:28:52

**SR:** Okay. And so then we go to harvesting. How do you harvest? Is it all mechanized?

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**JH:** Yes, it's all mechanized. We have self-propelled combines that harvest the crop. We have carts that haul it from the combine to the trucks. The trucks then take it from the field to the rice dryers, and—and it can be either a commercial dryer, or the majority of the people in this area have their own farm storage and their own dryers. They dry it themselves, and that way they can hold it and market as the market dictates, you know, because usually at harvest is the lowest price. So people try to hold it as long as they—you can, to try to get the better price.

00:29:44

**SR:** And what is a dryer? Is that hot air, or is that—what does that look like?

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**JH:** Yes. It's—again it's different types, but most of—it's the same thing so it's just different amounts of air, but it's usually air with a gas burner that pulls the burned—removes the moisture. The burners remove the moisture out of the air and it heats the air. It runs usually about 105 degrees. We'll—we'll set the burners at—to keep the grain at 105 degrees until it sucks all of the moisture out of the grain. Like I said, we harvest it 18 to, say, 20-percent moisture, and to store

the grain you have to get it down to 12—12 and a half-percent moisture. And that's what's—the heated air is used to remove the moisture out of the grain and bring it down to a safe level to store it.

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**SR:** And how long does that take generally?

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**JH:** On a farm dryer it takes usually around seven days. On a commercial dryer they run a different process and it probably—a shorter period of time that they put the heat to it, but it's probably half the time as it is on a commercial—on a farm-stored dryer.

00:31:07

**SR:** So then once it's dried, it still has the hulls on it, is that right? Okay, and then—and then, is that what happens next—the hulls get taken off?

00:31:16

**JH:** Right. Then you—then you sell it. The farmer will sell it to a processor, which will either be a mill that'll take it in and process it, remove the hulls, remove the bran, and bag the rice, or it will be sold as bulk rough rice, which in the past few years has—has really—we've sold quite a bit of that to Mexico and some of the Caribbean nations. More rough rice than we actually do mill rice because they're operating—they'll bring the rice to their location and do the milling—let their people do the milling rather than—. So we're losing the value-added that we had with

the mill, but—and I think the United States is the only nation in the world that allows rough rice to be sold. All the other nations will not allow it; it will only be milled rice that they sell.

00:32:15

**SR:** So they're—they're getting it that way because it's less expensive for them, but why are you selling it?

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**JH:** We—we have some—we're on a world type system now. We have to be competitive, and one of the ways that we're competitive with some of these third world nations is to allow it to go out as rough, and it helps them in that they have—it makes it probably more economical for them to use for their people. But we really would rather have the value-added for our nation, but again it's—it's economics. We do—it does allow us to sell into a market that we probably wouldn't get as a milled rice market.

00:33:12

**SR:** So the non-rough rice, the rice that gets milled—what happens next?

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**JH:** It's bagged. Now the majority of the rice that's milled at—at this facility is export. It goes to foreign delivery. Very little of it is used domestically.

00:33:38



**SR:** But I guess, I mean, can you describe what—what the process of milling is?

00:33:44

**JH:** Oh okay. Yeah, the process is removal of the—of the hulls, which is a milling machine that just knocks the hulls off of it. And then it goes into the mill, which is actually wheels that grind it and take—remove the bran from the rice.

00:34:06

**SR:** What does polished rice mean?

00:34:06

**JH:** That's it. That's white rice. It's just—it's the process that's used to take the brown off of it, the bran off of it.

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**SR:** And do you do enriching of rice here?

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**JH:** Yes, and I don't think they mentioned it a while ago, but it's—there's many different types of enriching, and it pretty much goes to what the customer wants. So whatever type of enrichment the customer wants is what's applied to—what's put into the process.

00:34:39

**SR:** And what do you put into it these days?

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**JH:** I really don't know. I'm not part of the rice mill. *[Laughs]*

00:34:45

**SR:** Okay. But rice that's not—like brown rice, I guess, has—already has a lot of nutrients in it. Is that correct?

00:34:58

**JH:** That's correct, and—and the main problem you have with the brown rice is storage, because the—all of the bran and the oil—I mean the oil that's in the bran is hard to keep without spoiling. You know it will rancid, get rancid awful quick, so you have to be real careful. There's—it's hardly any shelf life to brown rice. Now there's different processes they're using now to—like the minute brown rice and that, where it's actually processed some before it's put on the shelf. But brown rice itself is hard to bring to the market because it doesn't have a very long shelf life, where white rice, once the bran is removed, it'll—it'll last forever.

00:35:45

**SR:** If you were to, you know, keep brown rice, would you—I mean, would refrigerating it help?

00:35:51

**JH:** I would think yes. Put it in the—or a freezer would probably be the best way to store it when you get the brown rice. Put it in the refrigerator—and freezer.

00:36:00

**SR:** And what kinds of varieties of rice do you farm here?

00:36:04

**JH:** We produce only long grain rice. We have—probably 30 years ago we produced the majority all medium grain, but again it goes back to what the customer wants, and the customers now that we deal with usually want number two, long grain rice. We had Iraq and Iran in the years past. We—we sold the majority of their rice; the majority of their rice came from US rice, and it was medium grain. Well we've lost those markets, and since we've lost those markets we've gone to the long grain and—and found other customers.

00:36:50

**SR:** So when you were farming independently, were you doing the medium grain mostly?

00:36:54

**JH:** Again, that was many years ago. I did when I first started, but I guess long grain has been in the—the predominant variety now for—or the predominant type of rice for probably 40 years.

00:37:13

**SR:** So does any of the rice that's farmed here wind up on Louisiana store shelves?

00:37:20

**JH:** Oh definitely yeah. There's—there's some mills—this mill sells commercially—I mean domestically, but only in large quantities like 25-pound bags. There are no small packages. Now other mills in the area do package for local consumption with the two-pound or the one-pound bags.

00:37:46

**SR:** But the 25-pound bags—I mean, that's something that perhaps a boudin maker would buy?

00:37:50

**JH:** Exactly. Or there's—some of the people in the, in the culture will use that much rice in, you know—like I said, they'll put the rice in the freezer and use it as they need it out of the freezer, and you know—. There's a lot of people that buy the 25-pound bags because it—rice—maybe not as much now as in the past, but it was an everyday—put on the table every day in this area.

00:38:19

**SR:** I mean that's—like I said, I'm working on these interviews with, you know, about boudin and gumbo, and I'm not sure either product would exist without the rice component.

00:38:31

**JH:** Exactly. And you have the étouffées; you have the dirty rice; you have, you know, red beans and rice. There's many—many different local favorites that are used with rice.

00:38:43

**SR:** When you are working, and I guess especially when you were farming every day—you know, working with the land—did you think about how your, the impact of your work on the local culture, and you know that your product would probably end up on—well, it would definitely end up on some of your neighbors' tables?

00:39:02

**JH:** Not really 'cause actually the majority—when I did farm, my rice usually was sold to this facility, and this facility has historically been an export facility. So you know there—there were times when I sold to other mills, but they're—they're like 60 miles, so the freight difference usually dictated that this mill could get more for our rice than the one that was 60 miles away.

00:39:31

**SR:** It's funny. That's so funny that you're—that, you know, the farming exists pretty—I mean partially because the rice is so much a big part of this culture, but then it goes—it gets shipped away.

00:39:44

**JH:** Exactly, but you know they're—again, it's only about 40-percent of the rice that's actually shipped overseas, so the majority of it is still consumed here. It's just that, again, it's just this facility is not in the domestic market as much as it is into the export market, and that may be

changing. You know, we may be going into more of a domestic type market before it's over with, just to be competitive, to stay in the business.

00:40:17

**SR:** I'm curious: could someone in the area come by here and buy rice just from the plant?

00:40:23

**JH:** Yes, yes, that's what I said. They—you can buy it, but it's in 25-pound bags, the minimum size, so that—but they do sell it in the mill office.

00:40:33

**SR:** What is it about the geography of this area that makes it a good place to grow rice?

00:40:42

**JH:** I think it's a combination of the water availability. We have surface water that's available; we have good groundwater that's available. We have the temperate climate. We have the rainfall. We have the—we don't need the humidity but we have that. But I think it's just a—just the type of climate we have in the area just makes it real. It's more of a rice type environment than—than other areas.

00:41:17

**SR:** Do you know how long rice has been farmed in Louisiana and how it got here?

00:41:23

**JH:** I think rice was here—it came into the US in the 1700s or something, and I think my—my relatives came here in the mid-1860s, and I think at that time they brought a lot of the rice—brought the rice industry from just small pieces, you know in individuals' yards or whatever, or small areas, into a commercial entity, you know. So it's probably 1860s to 1900s is the most—when most of the expansion took place.

00:42:09

**SR:** So your family was integral in doing—in doing that?

00:42:11

**JH:** Yes. We—well it—the German settlement in Roberts Cove is where many of the Germans—when they came into the US they settled in the Roberts Cove area. And at that point, that's when they—they used the type soil they had there to produce rice.

00:42:37

**SR:** And so your father, I guess, was from—of German descent. Was your mother also?

00:42:42

**JH:** Yes, yes, yeah. They both were.

00:42:44

**SR:** And so do y'all consider yourselves Cajuns?

00:42:50

**JH:** No, we're German [*Laughs*]. We're German descent, but you know we've—they—the cultures have mingled. I mean meshed together, so it you know—it's all one in the same I guess now. It's not—back when my grandparents or great-grandparents came here it was different than it was now. The-the Germans and the Frenchmen probably didn't—didn't co-mingle as much as they, you know—. It's nothing now. Everyone is the same, you know, but—or it's so much inter-marriage and stuff anyway, they probably all are related anyway.

00:43:25

**SR:** So Germans—Germans these days eat boudin?

00:43:30

**JH:** Definitely, definitely. They make it. A lot of the boudin factories are from German—German people that run them or own them.

00:43:40

**SR:** So it was your great-grandparents who were the first generation here?

00:43:45

**JH:** Yes. My grandfather was, I think, 10-years-old when they came.

00:43:52



**SR:** And where did you grow up?

00:43:55

**JH:** I grew up in Lake Charles, yeah. My father and them were—were born and raised in Mowata, which is between Crowley and Eunice. And then my dad said his dad bought land, but then he quit buying land and started having kids, and he didn't have enough land for the kids, so they—he had to move away, so he came to Lake Charles.

00:44:19

**SR:** It's kind of a long way back then, I think.

00:44:21

**JH:** Oh definitely, yeah. It's about—about 65-miles, I guess, to the—where the home place was.

00:44:28

**SR:** But there's rice farming. He did rice farming there, huh? That's also rice country?

00:44:32

**JH:** Definitely. That's all—that's in Acadia Parish, which is probably percentage-wise a lot more rice grown there than there is in Calcasieu, where we are.

00:44:43

**SR:** And when you were growing up, I mean when—also when you were farming, you sold the un-milled—you know, you sold your rice to a rice mill. Did you keep any behind just to eat at home and process at home, or did you always buy your rice in the grocery store?

00:44:59

**JH:** We—we usually would take a small amount and bring it to—there were local mills or people that had small mills at their—on their farm or at their home, and they would mill the rice for you. But we did that when I was real young. I guess after—I guess pretty much most of my life, though, it was all—it all came from a commercial facility. It wasn't from the—.

00:45:32

**SR:** And so you would—when you were real young you had, you sometimes ate your own rice? Did you ever have brown rice?

00:45:39

**JH:** No, I've never had brown rice. It was always milled rice. It was many, many years you know—I never even knew there was such a thing as brown rice I guess 'cause we—we never did. We always used polished rice.

00:45:54

**SR:** I have about a million more questions, but you have to go 'cause you're starting the rice harvest. Can you tell me just to—to close up, what kind of gumbo your family makes?

00:46:05

**JH:** We love—we enjoy the seafood gumbo where you have shrimp and crab, or oysters or whatever, and shrimp or—or seafood and okra. We—my mother especially would—we always had okra in the gardens and she would cook the—fry the okra down, dry it and put it in the—in the gumbo, the seafood gumbo. But that was again something that's in the later years. Earlier it was mainly just chicken or duck. Well I guess mostly it was duck because that's what was, what they lived off of you know—the animals in the area, you know. They—they killed the ducks and had duck gumbo, or goose gumbo more than anything, and then it's like anything else: we've kind of progressed in our habits and stuff and we've gone to more conventional type meats and stuff in our gumbo.

00:47:01

**SR:** But I guess you could just go out into the rice fields and get a goose or a duck?

00:47:05

**JH:** Exactly, and—and that's what they did. They would—a lot of ducks in the area, so they would kill the ducks, put them in the freezer, and carry them through the—the rest of the year.

00:47:15

**SR:** And with sausage?

00:47:17

**JH:** We had—I don't remember them making much sausage except for when we would kill a deer. We'd—we'd take deer and make deer sausage, but far as pork sausage or something, we didn't do any—on our—in our family.

00:47:32

**SR:** But would the deer sausage wind up in the gumbo?

00:47:36

**JH:** Sometimes, but not too much. Mostly it was, it was chicken or duck or—. But they would put, you know, very little, but they'd put some sausage in it; yeah.

00:47:47

**SR:** All right. Well thank you for giving me your time on a very busy day. I appreciate it.

00:47:53

**JH:** Thank you.

00:47:54

**[End Johnny Hensgens-Boudin Interview]**