

JENNI HARRIS
White Oak Pastures – Bluffton, Georgia

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Location: Home of Jenni Harris, Bluffton, Georgia

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: One hour, nine minutes

Project: Women at Work in Georgia

[Begin Jenni Harris Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Wood: It's August 8, 2013, this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm sitting here in the home of Jenni Harris on Highway 27. We're at White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Georgia and I'm wondering if you would say hello Jenni and introduce yourself and tell me who you are, where we are, and what you do.

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Jenni Harris: Welcome Sara to White Oak Pastures. I am Jenni Harris. I'm the fifth generation of White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Georgia. Did you ask what I do?

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SW: Uh-hm.

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JH: Okay, what I do is I'm the Marketing Manager of White Oak Pastures, but that's really just code for low man on the totem pole. Whatever really needs to be done is what I do and—and I'm completely comfortable with that. I live here on the farm and I work here on the farm, which is a wonderful thing—a short daily commute and being able to be with my family a lot of times makes—makes my life pretty good.

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SW: And Jenni I'm wondering if you could start by talking a little bit about the—the historical legacy here. I mean it was started by your great, great, great-grandfather, if you could talk a little bit about the history and then I'm really interested in hearing stories about your memories of growing up here as a little girl.

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JH: Okay, so I am the fifth generation of White Oak Pastures. The—the first and second generations farmed much like we do today. They were really focused on local sales because that's really all they knew. The world is so much more interconnected with interstates and internet and all those inner-things that before all that you had friends and neighbors, which were really valuable resources and that's how you built your businesses. So the first and second generations really focused on you know what they loved to do, their passions which is agriculture and—and how to enterprise on those which is make it a business.

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The third and fourth generations which would be my grandfather and father really industrialized our farm and you know as taboo and not cool and—and factory farms are you know awful and dot-dot-dot all those things that—that people say but it was a reality that that's where the market went. Science gave us tools to make meat production cheap and easy and there wasn't necessarily a market for a—a local producer. So, you know, you can throw stones at whatever you want but my family did what you're supposed to do which is adapt with the market.

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So my dad went to University of Georgia and got a degree in animal husbandry and came home and really torqued down on steroids and hormones and antibiotics and confinement feeding, and one specific breed, and pretty much the opposite of what we do now which really made him a very successful cattlemen. Of course, I'm biased but I'm told that he's one of the best cattlemen around especially in this part of the country. But in about 1995 he really started transitioning our farm to what it is today which is much like what the first and second generations had.

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He realized you know which I think is a lot of things—I don't think there was one specific thing that made him change but from what I gathered a few different things happened. He—well he says what—what was really cool in his twenties was less cool in his thirties and was even less cool in his forties and gross in his fifties, so his—his personality and—and internal desires changed which is good. But he also had three daughters none of which were interested in farming.

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Growing up on the farm I was always interested in what happened but not necessarily from a cow/calf perspective which is the kind of farm we had. I was my dad's shadow and grew up basically following him wherever he went and that was a lot of fun but when I'm—when I'm asked what it was like to grow up on the farm I don't—I don't really—I can't say that I ever had any burning bush moments. I know what it's like to have a great relationship with my father but less of a passion for the environment or the—the animals, it was more so just a really good daddy/daughter relationship.

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So no? *[Interruption]*

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SW: Do you want me to pause?

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JH: So you know I had less of a—less of a desire to be a good land and animal steward but more so a desire to just spend quality time with my dad. So I was probably nine when he started transitioning the farm over to what it is now which is a certified organic farm where we vertically integrate I don't even really know that was the word—it's a certified organic farm where we raise and process all of our own animals. I was nine when he transitioned and I needed those—I needed the transitions and I saw those but they impacted me less because I was coming into my own opinions much later after we transitioned. So when the question is asked, "What was it like growing up," this is the—the way it is today is kind of the way it always was to me. I never—I wasn't old enough to—to really remember it being anything other.

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I do remember the 4H office where I went to 4H is where we sold calves every—every August after they were weaned and we would all as a family go up to the 4H office to the telemarketing sale which is where you would sell semi-loads of calves out West to be finished on grain and slaughtered in an industrial meat plant which is the reality of our farm. That was what we did.

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SW: So it was like a video-conference?

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JH: It was—it was a video-conference and you know all of that year’s hard work went into just that you know thirty second blip or whatever it was. And I remember waiting with baited breath and watching my dad to see if he was happy with what they brought. You know one man’s cows might have brought \$1.10, ours might have brought \$1.17. Another one’s might have brought \$1.25. And I left there just as pissed off as anybody that ours weren't the best. And that was—that was kind of my memory of what an industrial farm would have been like. I don’t really remember a lot of the other things.

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But today we—we raise and process all of our own animals in our—in our USDA [United State Department of Agriculture] inspected owned farm abattoirs which is really exciting and something that I—I’ve learned to take great pride in but it’s more so from looking back in the rearview mirror that I didn’t really realize how special it was until I realized how unique it was.

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SW: And I’m—just before we move on I just want to ask, I mean growing up out here, I just think it must have been incredible. There’s all this land and room and did you have a—like any stories about having a favorite spot or something that you would always do, a place that you’d play?

00:07:43

JH: Uh-hm, so the farm is really, really special and you know we've been on the same piece of land since 1866, so 147 years and you know I learned where my dad would have played and my dad is an only child so there's no uncles and aunts to really get any feedback off of. But there are a couple of places that are special. There's a spring at the Bell Place that—that flows and it's got a few deep water holes and we strung a rope up in a tree and we would go down there and swim every Sunday. We also begged for horses when I was younger and my dad, of course he loves to ride, but that's the last thing he had time for was riding horses with his children, but he did. Every Sunday we would ride horses and if we weren't riding horses then we would ride four-wheelers and what he would do [*Laughs*], it's really funny and it's a shame that this isn't videoed because you really should see how my hands are, [*Gestures*] but he would take us and strap us to the front of the four-wheeler with those rubber bungee cords and they would be so tight that they would literally leave indentions. There was room for two of us on the front and it was usually my—my older sister [Jessica] and myself. He would strap us, two straps, one across the top of our legs and one across our knees and my little sister [Jodi] would sit in between his legs and we would ride the four-wheeler through you know irrigation lines, through you know ponds and streams and weren't going anywhere, we were strapped in so tight. And it was—it literally like we felt like we were going a million miles an hour. But that was—that was a good memory.

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SW: Did he—when you were little and you were your dad's shadow did he—would he tell you stories or was he pretty busy working and you were kind of like hanging out?

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JH: No, that was—so my dad worked at Gold Kist which is [*Laughs*] surprisingly a—a kind of—a lot different than what he does now, but he was a regional manager but he was stationed in Arlington which is a small town about fifteen miles from here. And I went to work with my dad every time I was not you know in school and sometimes I'd lie and pretend I was sick so I could go to work with my dad. I have no idea what the infatuation was with Gold Kist but every day when I would get home from school he would pick me up from the bus. Sometimes he'd forget and he would have to send somebody after me. Sometimes he would remember and he would be there himself. [*Laughs*] But he always took ample amount of time to raise a child.

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Let's see what else, I had a story. Yeah Gold Kist, so he was a very busy person and Gold Kist was a very busy place, there would be fertilizer spreader, trucks, and semi-loads of chemicals and seeds and everything else coming in and out, tractors, and trailers, and employees coming and going and I learned to entertain myself. He always took up time with me but I really was an introvert as a child and you know played outside in the land plaster or made somebody you know carry me around and—and do something with me. But he was always—always part of my childhood. And when he got ready to go home at night he would whistle over the intercom. And wherever I was I could hear it and I would run up to the office and we'd leave, so—.

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SW: And for people who don't know what Gold Kist is could you explain what Gold Kist is?

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JH: My recollection of Gold Kist is basically this palace of grain bins and piles of dirt and basically the best playground ever, but in reality it's a—a company that evolved into Southern states and then a couple of other companies. But they sell chemical fertilizer and—and other agriculturally-related products.

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SW: Now Jenni, you were talking about you know you were nine when your dad started to change the business. And I—you don't—you know it's all the same you know you—you were nine, but I'm wondering did—was there a conversation that he had with you when things changed? Did he try to explain to you what he was doing? Do you have any recollection of that?

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JH: Absolutely, when he changed—my father was doing really well financially at his—at his—the company that he worked with ASI, and—and he sat us down one night at the kitchen table. And it was my—my older sister and my younger sister and my mother and my dad, and we talked about how he wanted to do something different. And my mom supported him, you know we—we asked questions but you know I was nine and—and Jodi was six and Jessica was twelve, so nobody really understood what—what it was or what it was changing from or to. He—he did explain it but at that point I don't even think he really understood what he was getting himself into and not in a bad way but you know it—I remember—we're sitting here in my grandmother's house which is the house my father was raised in when he started White Oak Pastures, he worked from the front of this house and I'll show you before we leave where his office was. But White Oak Pastures was born in this house.

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And I remember him having a brochure made up, it was an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper and on the front it said *Natural grass-fed beef* and I think we still have some somewhere, but it talked about the health benefits, it talked about why you should grass-fed, you know the—the negatives of—of not eating grass-fed beef, stuff that we don't know anything about. I mean we are farmers and he was out there selling what he knew he could produce. It made sense that that's what you were supposed to do. And then at the bottom it said something about you know maybe the Harris family has been on the same piece of land for you know 140 years or whatever it was at the time, but our—our business has evolved so much differently.

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He mailed those eight-and-a-half-by-eleven pieces of paper to the Bahamas, to New York City, to anybody with a—the word “meat” in their—you know in their business name and you know looking back I was thinking, “Man, you know this is a terrible idea. They're not all you know our consumer. You know those people can't all have possessed the—what we produced,” but it's all he knew how to do, you know and it's how he built our business. And you know from the—I guarantee you licked probably 500 envelopes and of the 500 that we sent out you know none of those people were—are our customers now. So our business, he didn't even really know what he was getting himself into. He—he knew what he wanted to do on his end, but he didn't know the meat industry which is just as important as the agricultural industry.

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SW: And I wanted to ask you before I forget—I forgot to ask your birth date, could you tell me your birth date?

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JH: My birth date is September 28, 1986 so I'm twenty-six.

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SW: And could you tell me, okay, so your dad's name obviously Will Harris. Mother's name is Von and could you tell me your grandparents' names?

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JH: So my—my father's mother is Eloise Harris, Eloise Redding Harris. She was Eloise Reading before she married my grandfather and my grandfather's name is Will Harris II or Big Will, so he's known around here. My grandmother's father was a blacksmith. She was one of either nine or ten children. They grew up very, very poor. Her mother passed away at a very young age and she took care of her aging father and you know back then you got married when you were like six, or not really but you know very young. And she chose to not get married until her father passed away. And I think she was in late twenties and before she actually married my granddad. They dated forever. And my granddad grew up very privileged, you know having a bunch of land and you know a bunch of hands on the farm. And he was a child of the Depression but he was pulled out of school in the sixth grade. His father went almost blind in the sixth grade and so he was basically pulled out of school and was my—my great-grandfather or his father's eyes. And so he would, you know, tell his father who was working and who wasn't. You know he—he dropped out of school or was pulled out of school but he was probably most one of the most educated people because he basically became a land owner and a business owner as a sixth grader.

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SW: The things we complain about today and—

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JH: Tell me about it.

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SW: I'm wondering could you talk a little bit about—I mean your—your dad is an only child. You'll—he had the three of you and three girls. What—I'm wondering, the first question I guess was there an expectation from your grandfather that your father would run this when he was done and I'm wondering how that's changed since like from your father to you guys like if you know—.

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JH: Yeah, I got it. It's a really good question. And it—the approach is completely different and it—it goes back even a step further. My grandfather was a very hard man to—to be around. He was very smart and very loving but the way he showed his love is completely different than the way my father shows his love. My granddad, the stories are when my dad was growing up he wanted my dad to be a medical doctor and was just adamant, adamant, adamant about my dad going to school and being a medical doctor. And dad finally had the conversation no I'm not going to do that, this is what I want to do. And my dad worked on the farm from the time he could walk until, you know, the time he went to get a full-time job himself. And then after that too and it was all for free. It was more of an expectation to work on the farm. He never got paid a dime for—you know there was no clocking or clocking out or you know—. My grandparents

took care of him financially, you know and bought him a car when he was sixteen and kept food on the table and clothes on his back but they certainly did not reward him for wanting to carry on the family business. And that might have been because he—they wanted him to be a medical doctor. That might have been because they felt like that was his duty, I don't know.

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Growing up my father always gave us the option of working on the farm but never the obligation and that carried through until college. I don't know what was wrong with me, but I had no direction. I mean, I had no excuse but I had—I could not figure out what to major in and it bothered me because I was, you know, a sophomore in college and everybody was either going to be a school teacher or a—you know—you know physician's assistant or a sports med you know major to go on and be a personal trainer or whatever else and I had no freaking clue what I wanted to do.

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So you know I had a few heart-to-hearts with my dad but one of which he said, “Everything is run like a business. Just you know if you can't figure out what to do just major in business and you know if it's a hospital it's run like a business, if it's a school it's run like a business, if it's a business it should run like a business.” And so I ended up majoring in marketing which was really a blessing in disguise but instead of my dad, he—he pushed me away just—just like my granddad kind of pushed him away. And that really—it didn't piss me off but it made me want to come home because I felt like I was missing out on so much. And it was a—a wonderful lesson because I'm not a parent yet but I aspire to be—that if you give people the room to make their own choices they're naturally going to gravitate back. And it was

awesome because he literally made me work for somebody else for a year before he let me come back.

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So my dad always talks about how and his dad could do everything together but work together. They could live together, they could eat together, they could hang out together but working together they were both the alpha-male who had their own opinions and not that they valued their—their own opinions over the other one but kind of they did. You know they both thought that they had the right idea and not all the time was it—you know was it the same. And my dad and I have the complete opposite relationship. I am scared to death that I'm going to disappoint him and he is scared to death that he is going to hurt me. [*Emotional*] Where are we going—?

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SW: Yeah, well I wonder so when you were growing up you didn't really—you didn't form a concept or you didn't really think about, “Hey, I could—I could do this, like this—I could come back here and work.” Did you—that thought never crossed your mind?

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JH: Never at all. When he was transitioning the business I—I had the mindset. “I will move to Atlanta. I will live in the city. I will,” you know it's exactly what this area is experiencing now. You know rural Southwest Georgia has been on the brain drain for a long time and I was on the brain drain. When I was in college the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was move back to the farm. I mean as a freshman in college, I went to a bar for the first time. I got in with a fake ID for the first time, I sat down with a blue drink that contained stuff that burned my nose to

smell, you know there were people with purple hair and hardly any clothes and they were, you know, I mean it sounds like I'm some sheltered child but in reality it was different and I think everybody kind of likes different for a little while at least you know and I was pumped about it. I loved—and I went to Valdosta [State University], not even any you know crazy place, you know I mean Valdosta is not that wild. But I did enjoy my college years and I did not anticipate coming back, and I was so excited to move to Atlanta and even when I got to Atlanta I loved it. I mean I'm easy going. I—you know I'm not hard to get along with or you know I'm a half-glass—glass half full kind of girl and I'm completely comfortable with that. But you know the more and more that I was in Atlanta the more and more I felt like I was contributing to something that I had no control over. And all these cool and exciting things were happening at home and I was—I was so disconnected from it because I couldn't touch it on a daily basis. And it frustrated me more and more and more and more and I looked at my year away from the farm as more of a task than a blessing of being in Atlanta. And the things that I—you know that I experience in Atlanta were great and I wouldn't trade them for the world, they were still—they were just experiences. It never could have been a lifestyle for me.

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SW: What did you miss most about here?

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JH: A million people will tell you that—that I'm just in the middle of everything. I know just enough—just enough to get by with. I don't read the end of the email. I just scan it and I felt like I was missing out on everything. I mean even if it was, “Well, we cleaned out the anaerobic digester today.” If you know what the anaerobic digester is it smells like crap, it's awful. It takes

rotten guts and turns them into a liquid that is then reapplied back to the pasture for fertilizer. It sounds really cool but it smells really bad. And even the littlest things like, “We cleaned out the anaerobic digester today,” absolutely infuriated me that I wasn’t standing there watching them clean out the anaerobic digester, you know, “We unclogged the—the drain on the kill floor got clogged up.” Well I was pissed that I wasn’t there to watch them stick the snake down the drain to unclog it. And that you know it—it was stupid. I mean there wasn’t one thing that I missed most. It was the fact that I just got real pissed off that I was missing everything.

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SW: So what year—okay so what year did you end up coming back from Atlanta?

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JH: I graduated college with a marketing degree or a business marketing degree in 2009. I moved to Atlanta, that was May of ’09 and I moved to Atlanta in June of ’09 and then I returned home June of ’10, so I just celebrated my third year as a full-time employee.

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SW: And can you tell me about how you started working here? I mean did—was it a conversation that you had with your dad or could you tell me a little bit about how that happened?

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JH: That’s interesting. I think he—we—I was very vocal about being disgusted with the fact that I was missing out on everything so we knew that, you know, I would do my diligence and

work for a year off the farm. But then you know dammit I was coming back and I wanted something to do. And the—the one thing that—that dad and I have talked about since then—I don't really remember there being a conversation or a steadfast, "Oh guess what? I'll be back on this day," but when I came back I felt like I wasn't contributing at all, that I had no idea what was going on and it was truly because our business was growing and going so quickly that I—I didn't know where I fit in. I knew I wasn't a—I didn't have a degree in animal husbandry and I knew I could not—I couldn't break down a carcass. I could cut meat because you know I had done it at Buckhead Beef a little bit and so I—but I wasn't a butcher. I couldn't fix water troughs or you know I couldn't bandage up a, you know, a pink-eyed cow. I couldn't kill a chicken. I didn't know where I—where I fit in. And then I realized it was more and more the relationship stuff that I was kind of—my dad's handler, you know I—if they couldn't get in touch with him they would come to me and then I would ask and I would get an answer. And so I kind of quickly found out that I wasn't necessarily his assistant because I don't want to be his assistant but I—I was you know more so contributing under him and that was—that worked out really well.

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Now I feel like I've kind of come into my own position and that's—that's been reassuring that you know I don't—I don't have any free time really at work. When I'm there it's you know it's all work and that was kind of how I knew I was finally getting comfortable with what I was doing. It was less of, you know, like tapping my thumbs on the desk of saying, "All right now, I need to really probably do something but I don't really know what needs to be done." And now it's you know I can't hardly get around to doing everything. And I'm so thankful for that feeling because the only thing worse than being overwhelmed is being

underwhelmed. And that's for the first two years I felt like, "Oh my gosh, I don't even fit in here. This is what I want but I have no idea what I'm doing," so—.

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SW: I know there is probably no such thing as a typical day but can you kind of walk me through what a day is like for you like the kinds of things you do and like the unexpected nature of things or just—? I don't want to say typical but just a day.

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JH: Uh-hm, so a day could consist of sitting in the office checking email to hosting like we did today with the Development Authority about you know employee housing to being anywhere from Washington, DC to Miami, Florida doing a demo or meeting with a distributor. It—it's all over the board and that's what I love about it is because when I get up I have—I know, "Okay I've got a meeting or a call at this time," or "I don't even have anything you know to do. I'm going to sit down in the—the bitty house and play with rabbits all day." You know I mean it's—that's what's so good about it.

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Yesterday dad left his cell phone on an airplane so I was the one that went to Albany [Georgia] to get him a new cell phone and you know while I was there I picked up a dog pen for a new guard dog puppy that we have. And then I came home and put it together and you know today we've been riding around the farm all day. I mean it's—there—there is no—no set routine and I'm—I am comfortable with that.

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SW: And can you sort of talk about like in the three years that you said you celebrated—you're celebrating three years, how—how have things changed in three years since you started working here?

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JH: On a—for—for me or—?

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SW: For—for you and for the farm? It's a two-part question—that you've noticed.

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JH: Okay, for me I've—I probably know myself better—strengths and weaknesses than I—than I ever have which is good. I mean any reasonable person would say, “As you get older you should learn more and more about yourself,” but that really is true. I know what I'm—you never say what you're good at. I know what I suck the least at. You know I know what—what I'm okay at and what I'm not okay at.

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And from—from a business perspective you know it—just like our farm we were focused for 140 years on one thing, our—our cows. And then we, you know, we kind of diversified and—and got some chickens, and some goats, and some sheep and our business is the same way. We had—we produced one thing—ground beef and my dad would have cows slaughtered in Tifton and the whole carcass ground. So when you ate some of that ground beef you knew you

were eating some of the rib-eye and some of the strip and some of the tenderloin fillet, and some of the chuck, and round, and you know dot-dot-dot everything else to we were producing more or you know of course we produced it. We raised cows with all those parts on it, you can't raise a cow with just ground beef or just—just steaks and that—you know that's a no-brainer, but we were able to extract the value I guess. We were able to develop a market for steaks and roasts and ground beef. And then we were able to develop a market for some lamb and beef and then we were able to develop a market for some chicken and some lamb and some beef and now we're working on, you know, vegetables and chicken and lamb and beef and guinea and duck and goose and rabbit, you know and—and then you know the restaurant and all those things. So it's—it's been such an evolution and one of dad's famous Will-isms is you know, "It's a journey and not a destination," and that is so true that everything kind of feeds the other one and that it's all necessary to make one thing better.

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SW: Jenni because this is all like—this year is women working food and I'm out here interviewing women who are involved with farming. I'm wondering do you—from your experience is it—is it rare to be a woman in this line of work? Do you see a lot of other women out there? Do you get interesting reactions from people? Have you ever had to deal with any of that kind of thing?

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JH: I think that there are certainly way more women in—in agriculture period, not just you know vegetable production or livestock production or women in the kitchen or you know—there are women, more women in this industry than we notice. You know one of—I am marketing and

I do a lot of demos in some of the larger grocery stores that we supply. And when I say, “Would you like to try some grass-fed beef grown on *my* farm in Southwest Georgia,” that’s kind of how you get people to you know—and I can get a second look before my dad. And it’s because people don’t expect for me to say, “my farm” and probably fifty percent of the people that I ask will come back and say, “Your farm?” And then but I consider that a blessing because then I get to say yes ma’am that was grown on my farm. I’m actually the fifth generation and we’ve been on the same piece of land since 1866. You know we raise and process you know our grass-fed beef. I hope you’ll try some. If you like it we sell it over there in the meat case.

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And but my dad doesn’t get that reaction because he wears the Stetson, the open road Stetson and the cowboy boots and the Wrangler jeans and he looks like your stereotyped cowboy. And so with it being women and food you know there are more women in this industry than what we notice but we also have such an upper hand because people don’t expect us to say that. You know people—people would never look at me and say, “Your farm?” And but you know what? That’s an opportunity to say, “Yeah, you know it is actually, you know and if you want to throw a bitch in there you can.” *[Laughs]*

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SW: Are you—I’m trying to figure out how to ask you this question but just there’s a couple things I want to go back to. I did want to ask you about the relationship between—or the role that White Oak plays in the community here. Talk about what—what you guys are working on if you can about the housing bank situation.

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JH: Sure, so White Oak Pastures in—in—is just as proud of its economic impact as it its land and animal stewardship impact, etcetera. We do employ eight-five full-time people and they—none of them make minimum wage. We do subsidized healthcare and we do subsidize a dollar a day lunch for the employees on the farm, so there are a lot of perks and we've got friends and neighbors that—that aren't necessarily as focused on what we do as we do.

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You know our—our customers are often not our friends and neighbors and that's— that's—it's an interesting concept but most of the folks around here their grandmama(s) had gardens or their—you know their grandfathers had steers that they would feed out and have slaughtered and eat that freezer beef all—all year.

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People aren't as closely related to the centralized food production system that we are now so accustomed to. That—that comes through more to people that swing through the drive-thru of McDonalds twice a day, once on the way to work, once on the way home, as opposed to like my father's generation who grew up dreading picking weeds in the garden. You know it's—it's a— people here have more respect for the food production system and aren't as far removed but they still are not—they still don't quite understand exactly where White Oak Pastures fits into that.

00:36:21

SW: And even though it's—I mean well, I guess because things changed in '95 [1995] but I think that this—it's been here for so long that it would naturally just be embedded into the community and so I guess you know when you were telling me all these stories today about how there's a—you know there's this disconnect that these aren't necessarily—the community isn't

necessarily customers, I just had—I walked in assuming, “Well it’s been here for so long. It’s naturally connected.”

00:36:48

JH: Sure, sure and—and they—I think they all support us to a certain level but only to the extent that they let themselves understand who we serve, you know our niche market you know our customer. You know dad always says you know, “The folks around here are my friends and neighbors but they’re not my customers,” and it’s—you don’t have to necessarily you know throw rocks at us or anything for being different and they don’t. You know it’s just more so just a less of an understanding.

00:37:17

SW: And then before I—I have a few more questions for you Jenni if that’s okay. But before I forget I just want to make sure I have the bread and butter here in terms of all the facts. Can—and you’ve mentioned this in bits and pieces but can you talk about what you raise here and a little bit about the abattoirs?

00:37:36

JH: I can, I want to say this too. You know we’re not evangelists. We farm the way we want to farm. And we’re lucky to have found a customer that wants us to farm that way and will support us farming that way. But you know the—the very idea of—of pioneering the market or any of those things I don’t really think is—is necessarily accurate simply because we were doing something and we didn’t like it. And so we changed it. And we’re now doing something that we do like. And it has—it has great effects on some things and—and some things it doesn’t affect.

But, you know, more and more people are—are swapping over to—to a sustainable farming model but it's because they realize that it's kind of—it is a good—a good model to follow.

00:38:31

So what do I need to tell you?

00:38:32

SW: Oh well just about what you raise here, but I do have another question within that.

00:38:39

JH: Okay.

00:38:39

SW: Did you notice a change in your father after he switched things? I mean did—did you notice a shift in his personality or anything or did he seem—?

00:38:50

JH: No, no, a shift in my dad's personality would not have really been clear. My dad has always been a very hard working person. He's probably the hardest working person I know. And—and so he's kind of one of those—he's—this is something that he's always said but it—it's been true all of my life, he doesn't love a lot of people but when he loves you it's not like a flashlight it's like a laser. You know some people have a lot of love in their heart to give and they give it to everybody. And they—you know that's—that's good but that's just one way of showing affection. My father has always said he doesn't love a lot of people but when he does love you it's like a laser and not like a flashlight and so that's—that's always been very special. And I see

that more and more true you know as he ages and as he—I'm able to kind of look at his relationships and—and understand them because I understand him better, but there was no real personality shift or anything like that. My dad does a great job managing his emotions with his family and then his business and it could be the worst day ever. Every tractor can break, every saw in the plant is down, every—he's not getting emails and his cell phone is on an airplane in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and when he comes home he leaves it at work, so—.

00:40:13

SW: Where—okay, so before I forget what—can you talk just a run-through of what you guys raise here and what the—like because you know you took me all around today and so I'm wondering if you could kind of just give a run-down of what you showed me today.

00:40:28

JH: So, White Oak Pastures up until about 2003 raised nothing but cattle. In 2003 we got a few sheep and then some goats and then some chickens. We now proudly raise and process sheep, goats, chickens, hogs, rabbits, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, and guineas. We also have a six-acre certified organic vegetable farm and also a pastured egg you know business with our laying hens.

00:41:07

SW: And can you talk about who your customers are like who do you sell to?

00:41:11

JH: We've always—and quickly found out that our customer is—is anybody that is highly disposable income person who has studied the food production system and understood and demanded something different, done by hand, you know done locally, done sustainably and so we—we serve those people on a—on a direct business through our website. We also sell to a couple of different grocery store chains, Publix and Whole Foods. And then also to restaurants either directly or through Buckhead Beef or Halpern's, who are food distributors that basically run delivery trucks up and down the East Coast.

00:41:59

SW: And can you talk about the CSA [community-supported agriculture] too just to throw that in?

00:42:02

JH: So the CSA program has—has been around since about 2010. But it has grown more recently under the management of our organic vegetable farm manager, Tripp Eldridge from Macon, Georgia. Tripp came here in November of 2011 and he has done some really wonderful things. He grew our organic vegetable from about two acres to six and he is now serving about 120 families from Tallahassee, Florida all the way up to Warner Robins. I think he stops the truck seven or eight times in—in a central location in seven or eight cities and—and distributes vegetables that—that we grow and harvest and wash and box here up to—up to those central locations. And there are three different CSA options: the vegetable, the meat, and the egg CSA.

00:43:07

SW: And let's see, oh, will you tell me a little bit about Bluffton and because you were so great about that today and I just wanted to get you tape talking about the town and—and the situation it's in right now?

00:43:19

JH: Sure, so Bluffton is a—a small community and my address is Bluffton. I live in Bluffton and the only thing that you can legally buy in Bluffton is a postage stamp. There are no red lights. There are about 100—I think about 102 residents, half of which I have never even seen before. We think folks are claiming folks that don't really live there but that's all right. Bluffton is kind of special and this—and it's not specific to Bluffton, this area where White Oak Pastures is—is sort of a magical area. We're at the bottom of the Appalachian foothills where the Appalachian Mountains go subterranean and it's like a finger that sticks out into the Gulf climate which is wonderful for agriculture because we can keep something green growing fifty-two weeks out of the year.

00:44:21

So we have found and I think that historically several people have found that you can grow more here per acre than you can anywhere else. And we have reason to believe that because this area was the most populated area in North America at the time of the birth of Christ. And now it is labeled rural Southwest Georgia. So there's—there's certainly something that's going on there. But I think that the—you know Kolomoki Mounds are just about three miles from here as the crow flies and I think that they probably found that they could grow more per acre here than they could anywhere else.

00:45:08

This is also—Bluffton is a strange town in that back when towns were established 18—early 1800s Bluffton was established in 1815 and they were established on a river because that was how trade was done. There was no fifty-three-foot semi that went up and down the interstate to deliver toilet paper and olive oil. It was everything was done on a river. And Bluffton's not a on a river. Bluffton is the high ground between the Chattahoochee and the Flint. And so it's—it's just kind of a really interesting thing if you get to looking at the history of—of how this area was really, really populated and then has just been on the decline ever since. Now right now it's the least populated—what's the word that I'm looking for—the least populated?

00:45:57

SW: Yeah, yeah least populated—I don't know if density—no that sounds too mathematical.

00:46:05

JH: Well right now there are fewer people in Bluffton than there has since the time of the birth of Christ, which is I think indicative to a lot of things but I think largely attributed to the industrialization of agriculture. You know when we—it used to take 100 people to tend to 150 acres and now it takes five people to tend to 10,000 acres. So, you know, I don't think that people got tired of the country and wanted to move to the city. There were no jobs in the country and in order for people to live they had to move to the city.

00:46:48

SW: How—okay, I don't want to get too much into that but are you good?

00:46:56

JH: I'm good, I'm just making sure all those are—

00:46:59

SW: Okay, I'm wondering um, if you could—

00:47:04

JH: Can I say one more thing about that?

00:47:04

SW: Oh yeah, yeah.

00:47:06

JH: And also all of those facts are family lore so should they not be true just remember I'm only twenty-six. Okay, I'll just put that disclaimer on it.

00:47:15

SW: Can you talk about the housing thing?

00:47:18

JH: I can talk about the housing. So White Oak Pastures is proud to offer up eight-five quality jobs, full-time, and—and with that folks from far away commute to White Oak Pastures. We've got about five or six employees none of which are romantically involved with each other and all of which live in one three-bedroom house. So six hard-working people in a three-bedroom house is only good for so long, you know you work together, you eat together, and then when you go

home the last thing you want to do, unless you're in a relationship, is sleep together. And sometimes even when you're in a relationship you don't want to sleep with them.

00:47:59

So White Oak Pastures has kind of been tasked with finding a place for these people to go. You know there have been probably—there's probably fifteen people with bachelor's and master's degrees that work at White Oak Pastures, all of which could afford a—a nice apartment or house and none of which have the ability to rent a nice house or apartment because there is no housing. You know we've got people stacked up sleeping on couches. My father's house and my house is kind of a halfway house between the transition of moving here and finding somewhere to go but always the deal buster around here is—is housing. And we are proud to offer eighty-five quality jobs all of which are done by hand and—and none of which are going to be removed due to the mechanization of our business.

00:48:56

Our—our customers want it to be done by hand. We want to do it by hand. And so there is some job security there. If—if we have to start letting people go it's not because we got a machine that was bigger and better than they are.

00:49:09

So we are lucky enough to have gotten in front of the right people and we—we're in conversations of—of how White Oak Pastures and the City of Bluffton and Clay County can go about building some—some workforce housing whether that's apartments or duplexes or you know—there will never be an apartment complex in Bluffton. That's just—it's not—that won't happen, but what could happen is small cottages or cabins where you know some of these really talented smart people could—could take a shower in their own bathroom and sleep in their own bed.

00:49:50

SW: Can you talk a little bit—oh just because I have pictures of this can you talk about how like buying the store, like how you guys are buying—?

00:49:58

JH: Sure, also in the town of Bluffton the—some of the historical buildings are still there and they're probably in the—the last minute of—of being salvageable. We recently purchased an old general store called the—can we get some water?

00:50:18

SW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:50:21

JH: We recently purchased the old general store called the Herman Bass Store. Mr. Herman Bass owned it and it was stocked with your everyday goods, some foods, a few tools, you know some—some belts for your car but it literally—the door shut in the late '60s [1960s] and it's been looted, but it's—there's still a lot of stuff that the vandals didn't think was worth anything.

00:50:51

So we have been in the process of the past couple of months going through the Herman Bass Store and—and separating the trash from the treasure and some of the stuff that we found is—is just unreal. You know everything from yo-yos to Kotex pads to bottles of Black Drought diarrhea medicine to, you know, glass insulators to toilet seats to any kind of nut or bolt you

could ever imagine, clothes, hats, gloves, I mean it's—it was unreal to see you know what—what—what things were in a general store. You know you hear all about, you know, so and so's general store, but to actually see a general store was a really—a wild experience. So we—we hope to kind of restore that. The floor is sinking in and the roof is leaking and the sides are leaning, but I think that as long as there's some cash flow running through White Oak Pastures we'll be able to stabilize it and hopefully restore it to maybe a museum or something in the short run to—to kind of show off some of those old heirlooms, but, you know, what was just a part of daily life.

00:52:20

SW: Jenni this is sort of a big broad question, so I'm wondering what you think from working with your dad for the last few years and growing up being his shadow some things that he—that you've observed from him that maybe you didn't notice until later or just something that you see—you see something that you do and you can see your dad's hand in it.

00:52:48

JH: Let me make sure I have the question right, personality things that have come through about me or—?

00:52:54

SW: Yeah, or some aspect of working with—on the farm or and in your role now as marketing manager just—I guess personal and business.

00:53:04

JH: Uh-hm, so the older I get the more I am—I see myself as my father. From the way he fidgets, if you walk in his office to see his desk he’s got paper clips that he’s straightened out and twists on the end of a toothpick and then stuck through a wine cork and then you know balanced on a nail and you know his—his little OCD fidgety—fidgety ways come through to me and I’m now labeled antsy. But really that’s just Will Harris in me and I’m—I’m comfortable with that.

00:53:42

Some of the things on a professional level that—that come through that I have learned from him, first of all, is that you have to be clear and concise. I have watched my dad say, “Yes,” and say, “No,” and say, “This is what I expect from you or this is what you should have done.” Being certain is so much better than being wishy-washy because as a fifty-six-year-old man he didn’t really care who he pissed off. You know it was what it was and it you know—the answer was yes or the answer was no and if it was yes, this is—it’s because of this and if it was no it’s because of this. And—and he was always very blunt and straightforward. But coming in as a twenty-four-year-old girl I wanted to please everybody. And I would run around my elbow to get to my back to say, “Well, maybe I can do this, maybe, maybe,” and the conversations went on and on and on and on and the ultimate answer was no. And so I have learned that being clear and straightforward is so much healthier for you and the person you’re dealing with and that—that is something that my dad is really good at and that I have recognized. But it—it only makes sense that I wouldn’t be that way as a twenty-four-year-old girl and he would be that way as a fifty-six-year-old man. And so that was—that was one of the—my real-life you know realizations and then I said, “Okay he is for sure right about this one.”

00:55:23

Let's see, what was the other one that I was going to mention? I'm not really sure. I had—I had another one brewing but—

00:55:39

SW: Maybe it will come back.

00:55:41

JH: Maybe it will. Say the question again.

00:55:42

SW: Well I guess I wanted to see how you've noticed your father's influence on you both professionally and—

00:55:48

JH: Okay, okay and then also my dad's influence on me is I think apparent in a lot of different ways. We seem to be pretty aligned with—with our priorities and with the things that we believe and want to be true. You know we—we both agree that you know we want to take care of the people that work with us at White Oak Pastures. You know we both agree that employees are you know on the list of the top three things. We both agree that you know being a good land steward is you know at the very top of the list. You know it's one of the top three things. We both agree that the—the animals are at the very top of the list. You know, it's you know the top three and those three things were three of the things that if you had asked me in when I was a

senior in high school I would have said, “Eh, you know maybe. It just depends on what’s going on in Atlanta. You know it just depends on what’s going on somewhere else.”

00:56:45

And I—you know there are things about me that make me feel that way, you know or that would have made me feel that way. I was itching to get out of Atlanta or get to Atlanta for a lot of different reasons so you know I’m—I don’t regret having my priorities where they were but it—you know they’ve evolved into what they are now and I’m proud to say that they are much in line with my dad which makes our working relationship so much more harmonious as opposed to combative.

00:57:13

SW: And I asked you this earlier but I’m wondering if you could talk about do you think that your relationship with your dad is different than say his relationship with your other sisters? Like are you guys—your connection?

00:57:26

JH: Absolutely, I am the middle child so I—you know by default am the awkward one, debatable, but probably pretty true. **[Laughs]** My younger sister is the baby and so she loves my mother and she loves my father but she and my mother get along on such a complete different level because they prioritize the same things. She’s getting married in October, and I’m so excited that she’s getting married. I could not be any happier with the—the man she’s marrying. He’s one of my best friends and we’re all so lucky to have him, but I could not care less about the wedding. You know what color dress it is, what color the flowers are, you know what music we’re going to walk into, it’s just not a priority for me—good or bad.

00:58:15

The same way for me, you know and my dad, you know she—she couldn't care less about who we showed around today at work. That's not a problem, it's just not her priority so she—she and my mother see eye-to-eye on—on different things and my father and I see eye to eye on—on different things and so it—it kind of creates a—a level of um, of respect that—of course I love and respect my mother and Jodi loves and respects my dad, but you always gravitate towards one parent. You see—you see things more clearly when one parent says them than the other one.

00:58:56

SW: And I'm wondering do you think—I mean I don't know if you want to answer this and you don't have to, do you think that when your dad finally decides that he maybe wants to retire, he's done, do you think that you'll take over? Do you guys talk about that?

00:59:10

JH: We do. Part of being sustainable is a sustainable succession model and so we—we do talk about that and we do talk about changing the business or adapting the business to—to what my younger and sister I want to run as opposed to what he built it to be. And—and whatever that means, you know it—it—it might not be this or it might be that or it might be exactly the same or it might not but one thing is for sure, my dad is very good about involving me and my—my future brother-in-law and my—my younger sister in the conversations of, "If we do this here is going to be the net effect. And if we do that you know this is what's going to happen."

00:59:52

And so I don't really ever think my dad is going to retire. He's so involved and I don't think anybody wants him to. I feel like my dad will retire when he drops dead. And—and that's okay with all of us. I feel like he'll probably travel less and less because his sense of place is here and this is where he wants to be and this is where he's happy and—and so I feel like probably he will always—always have a say and he will always be a part of it. I don't think that's ever going to go away.

01:00:29

SW: Do you feel like you have that same connection to this place, like—?

01:00:33

JH: That's really interesting and yes, I do. For—for such a long time I followed around dad and I wasn't really interested in the farm or in Gold Kist. I just was interested in being his companion and being his shadow and I—I thought you know am I really even going to like this place after he's dead and gone and you know he's not—not—will it be as much fun? And it—it will be, you know it—I will be happy doing it.

01:01:01

SW: What do you—I know this is—I don't mean to be cheesy but what do you love most about working on this land? I mean, not a whole lot of people can say that they're fifth generation doing something.

01:01:12

JH: We are rich but it's not at all financially. We are rich in history and you can buy a lot of things but you can't buy history and you can be prideful about a lot of things but if you don't have history you can't be prideful about it. And—and so probably the thing that I value most is the fact that my family has always done what's been right for our family. You know if it was raising and selling things locally because that's what produced a living then that's what we did. If it was shipping calves out West to a—you know into an industrial model then that's what we did because that's what kept food on the table for the family.

01:01:52

Whatever happens is—is what's going to happen and we will adapt to it and we will continue to put food on the family for—food on the table for our family because that's—that's why we have such a rich history. It's not—it has nothing to do with you know because we did this right or we did this wrong. It's because family was the most important thing and—and had one selfish generation not adapted with the times, White Oak Pastures wouldn't be here. So, you know, it's—it's important to—to think about the next five generations, you know, not just about what's going on right now. And that's—that's one thing that I'm kind of proud of and I don't think that I do enough of. I don't really think to the future near as much as I should but that's one thing that my dad does do.

01:02:45

SW: And one more thing. How do you think—are you okay with that?

01:02:49

JH: Yeah, yeah.

01:02:50

SW: I lie and I say one more question but it's like twenty more questions.

01:02:53

JH: I'm fine, I'm fine.

01:02:54

SW: How do you think that your farm and this business has changed the way people in Georgia or if it has changed anything between the connection between how people eat here in Georgia or from the farm to the table, like do you notice, do you—I guess basically I'm asking what impact you think that your farm has had on Georgia or in the Southeast?

01:03:22

JH: So I know my dad—excuse me—. You know we are not evangelists. We—we absolutely don't think that we've come up with the quoted “right model.” We found the right model for us. We found the—the model that's fun for us to run. We found the model that luckily has a consumer that—that is easy to find. But you know I can't say that we've done much to—to change the way Georgia produces food. You know it's—we've changed the way we produced food and I think that we were able to scale it up on a level that showed that it was economically sustainable to—to produce food this way. And I think that's kind of the one marketing point that we have that—that maybe everybody doesn't have. You know we're not evangelists. We're not any more sustainable than you know the—the person with—with one acre of land that's got it planted in vegetables. They—just—just as sustainable, we don't do any better of a job but what

we were able to do is we were able to scale up production along with the demand before we went bankrupt. So that was—I think that’s really the only thing we were able to—to do that—that was different in Georgia that would have made us unique. And—and so it’s—you know, I don’t think we changed the way a lot of people farm. I think they did that for themselves just like we did that for ourselves.

01:05:12

SW: Do you think you’ve changed the way people eat at all?

01:05:16

JH: We’ve provided an alternative but I think people change the way they eat. You know it—you know we—today you and I were talking about priorities and how I’m lucky to be able to prioritize my food up at the top of my list but I—how can you look down on somebody that doesn’t have the ability to prioritize that that’s got two children and is trying to go back to school and you know has X-amount of money but just cannot simply afford to prioritize food? That—you know there is nothing wrong with that. You know, and I say you know food is my passion and, you know, doing things this way is my passion and it is, but I’m so lucky to be able to—to do this as my passion because it’s not—it doesn’t work out that way for everybody.

01:06:06

SW: Jenni, I don’t have any more questions for you, specific questions. But is there anything else that you think is important that I didn’t ask you that you want to say or any stories around the farm that you want to share?

01:06:23

JH: Probably if I had anything else to add that I'm very lucky and blessed to have been able to find a—find my passion and my purpose in life so early, not you know—I have several friends that I went to college with that are basically working their nine-to-five and, you know, upset about it, and I don't have to do that. I don't work a nine-to-five and I'm thankful for that. And I—my opportunities are—are so much more than most people my age because of this farm and I am truly grateful. It has allowed me to get an education and to do things, to go places, to see things, to talk to people that I never would have had the opportunity to do and so it—it has been a—I owe this farm a lot. So I could work the rest of my life busting my ass for it and it still wouldn't be enough.

01:07:26

SW: Well I really thank you for sitting here and doing this.

01:07:30

JH: No, I've enjoyed it. I've enjoyed it. Thank you for coming. I think that stuff like this is very important because you know there are several things that I need to get my dad on tape saying because once you know once he you know is gone it's gone.

01:07:42

SW: Have you ever sat down to do this with him?

01:07:44

JH: Uh-um, I can't. Somebody else would have to do it. You know I need to have it done, but—we've done Story Corps.

01:07:51

SW: You have?

01:07:52

JH: We have together.

01:07:53

SW: Oh that's so cool. Were they—did they come down here or—?

01:07:56

JH: Uh-um, we went up to Atlanta. We've done it twice together. So and that was special but this—this is valuable. This is—what you're doing is powerful, you know documenting things is—is you know history—the future is based off you know the history. And if you refuse to look at the history then you—you're going to be ignorant in the future and y'all are what's making that you know making this possible, so I really do appreciate you coming here. This isn't the most comfortable thing in the world, but [*Laughs*] I really do appreciate it.

01:08:27

SW: I think you did really well though and you—you bear(ed) with me in my—I'm going to turn the tape off now.

01:08:33

[End Jenni Harris Interview]