New Histories: The Gadsden Farm Oral Histories Excerpts Transcript

Interviews by Holly Hannessian, Florida Folklife Program, and Florida State Archives

[*BEGIN INTERVIEWS*]

[00:00:00]

Jewel D.: My daddy had taught me to be independent. And, in the early [19]60s, Farmers Home Administration, you could borrow that money. They were lending money for, like, two or three percent. But I didn't want it. He taught me not to go that way. I was keepin', like, about eight or nine hundred head of hogs. That was pigs and big hogs. All the time. And I was tryin' to sell a hundred head a month. And every day, I would go home, I'd be at my house at 12:30 to listen at the Gene Ragan Farm Show and rang the hog price. 'Cause I was feedin' a lot of 'em. It got in the 40. I'll be there listenin' at the Farm Show, and hit forty cents that day. I say, "Oh, Lord. Thank you, Jesus. It's movin' up." I got up, day or two later, forty-two. I say, "Hey, they move it." I say, "Probably gonna break fifty this year. I'm gonna make some money." 'Cause I had 'em. It got about forty-five, I said, "Yes, sir. The price is movin' up." Boom! Next day, it fell like a cent or two. It went back. Every day, it went to forty and then back. Fell out to forty. I said, "Lord, have mercy. What it’s doin'?" It got, like, in the thirties, but I still got all these hogs, I've still got to go get this feed. I get fourteen ton one week, seven ton the next week. Takin' hogs off to fall a little back, it won't pay my feed bill. I said, "Lord, have mercy. What's goin' on?" But they kept fallin' back. I start sellin', sellin' down, and hogs had done fell from forty-some cent a pound down to five cent a pound. That was in 1980. I told my wife, I said, "Well." I quit the state in [19]65. It was [19]80, I hadn't worked no way till then, I was a farmer. I said, "I got to get my job somewhere and go to work." So, it was either

get a job over there at A.C.I., Department of Correction. And at that time, I owed that feed company ten thousand, five hundred something dollars. I went to them and talked with the man, tryin' to pay them by the month. He said they need the money bad. I said, "Mister, I ain't got it. You can't get blood from a turnip." I said, "Imma do the best I can, but I ain't got it to pay you right now." So, he talked kinda hard. I said, "Wait, you said it day one, I ain't got it, you can't get it. Do what you gotta do." I went to work Department of Correction. Every two weeks, when I got my check, they had a branch office up at Chattahoochee at that time, I go there, cash my check, give them two hundred and fifty dollars. I paid them five hundred dollars a month. I left the hogs alone. I went strictly to cows. I didn't have many, but I worked at A.C.I., I raised a few cows, and I worked there till I pay it down. Those ten thousand five hundred dollars.

[00:03:43.06]

Max V.: Yes. I was up in southeast Alabama, in a very, very rural area. I was up there goin', the Cottonwood to the hot springs. They have a hot springs in Cottonwood, Alabama. And oh, it's a wonderful place. On the way up there, on the back road, was this little house with a very well-kept yard, all raked. Small, small house and beautiful black lady up on the front porch in a white linen dress. I'd always wave to her and she'd wave to me when I'd be goin' up to the hot springs. Finally, I stopped in there one day to ask her, after I noticed she had a beautiful patch of the elephant garlic growin' in her backyard. At that time, I only knew the elephant garlic was comin' from California. I knew this old lady had not ordered fancy garlic, gourmet garlic, from a seed house on the West Coast. So, I talked with her for a minute, told her who I was and where I was from. We talked about

the weather. Then, I asked her, "Where did you get your beautiful garlic?" She looked at me again to make sure I wasn't with the government, and looked me right in the eye and said, "Lord, child, my mama's mama brought that over here on the crossing." And I . . . hair went up on the back of my neck and I knew then that this was the old ancient garlic. I'd heard a year earlier or so watchin' a old farm show up in Dothan, Alabama, Gene Ragan would come on at noon, I'd be in there havin' a sandwich or somethin' out of the field. Gene would wear this little cowboy hat and tell you the farm report and how hogs are doin' and everything, and he said he was excited 'cause he had the Garlic King comin' today to talk. After he gave the commodity news. And I said, "The Garlic King? I gotta see him." And so, this gentleman showed up and he was in his late sixties or early seventies and had an old Colonel Sanders goatee. Old Gene could tell, he liked him, and he said, "You still growin' your garlic?" He said, "Yeah, I've got it growin' up there." And he was a big proponent, sayin' that it was a great crop for small farmers in this area. I said, "Well, I can't believe this. They're growin' it up there, too." He said that the Indians told him that it was the only thing the white man brought that was worth a damn, was this garlic. But the Garlic King said, "Tell you, the white man didn't bring it." Said, "The slaves brought it." You know? The white man had the ship, you know, but it was the slaves that brought the garlic, which came from North Africa. That's the oldest garlic on the planet right there. You can take these pearls that we're growin' and cut 'em in half and you'll see the shape of a spade. A spade is Arabic architecture. That was another clue that this was not—this was some kinda different garlic. So, this isn't just regular garlic. This is *the* garlic. Now, we'r e in that process of learnin' more and more about how to grow this old ancient garlic. So, stay tuned. [Laughter]

[00:07:43.10]

Calvin D.: I grew up on a farm and stuff, and that's all I knew and that's all they did, was farming. On a tobacco farm, then after the tobacco farm, went to the tomato farm, pole beans, and squashes. I didn't want to be a truck-driver, no fisherman or hunter. I just loved farmin'. I loved the land, and I love watchin' stuff grow. At the end of the season, I love harvest, pickin' it. Like the spin on the tractor, turnin' the dirt, gettin' the row, gettin' the beds ready for to plant the seeds and stuff and watchin' it grow. And just talkin' to it. Growin' plants do have life and stuff. You know what I'm saying? It's alive in the ground, it's alive. My children, they love it, too. They love watchin' it growin' and that's what I wanted to be. I want to do it for them, make it where they can do it after me. See a little somethin comin' in and stuff, to keep it goin'. I never knew about farming really until I met Max. Watching how he do it and the way we do it. Way they did it was with, like, say a lot of chemical fertilizers. We don't do it out here. They were spraying, they were fertilizing and these things, you know what I'm saying. We keep it natural. We're puttin' good stuff in the dirt and takin' out of the dirt, and puttin' good stuff back in the dirt. The way they did it was stuff the way the man who they're workin' for told them how to do it and how they had to do it, whether it was good for your health or bad for your health. That's the way they did it. The way we do it, it's good for our health. We eat it right out of the field. Back then, you had to soap wash it before you eat it, get all the stuff off of it. Out here, you be takin' it, get a little, polish it off, put it right in your mouth like medicine. I love it, I love it. I don't like leavin', goin' somewhere else. I love it out here. I love farmin'. I just love this being out in the field and stuff. My full-time gig is drivin',

and that's something that I've got—I do it, but I really don't, I guess I don't like doin' it. You know what I'm sayin'? Instead of being energizing, it de-energizes you. Out here, it energizes me, 'cause my hand—you know, earth and life. And it's just— I gotta do what I gotta do, for money to come in for the family, to support the family. Advertising and marketing, that's my vision. I invest in cards and flyers. Pass my cards out in stores and even doctors' offices and courthouses and schoolhouses, I hang up my flyers. That's how I advertise the green man. Then they just call, they call. Everybody call me from the churches, schools, and some restaurants they get it and they'll call me for a few, some bundles.

[00:10:23.21]

Gloria R.: [Speaking Spanish][English transcription] Well, it's been 43 years since our family arrived to this country. We arrived illegally, we didn't have papers . . . but we made it. Since then, we have worked here in the field in manual labor jobs. We do all the growing and harvesting of what the earth provides. Like tomatoes, squash, eggplant . . . Yes, for us the labor and work in the field is very hard. It's so hard as well when it's very cold or hot outside, but also it gives me pride, to grow the harvest that arrives to the table to feed many people. My kids, we brought all of our children as well into the field, since they were little. So there they grew up, eventually got married and left.

Josephina P.: Our family also came here from Guanajuato. Us as well, we came here without papers. We crossed over through the river. So we brought our family here, to make our own home. We suffered to get here, but we made it here, thanks be to God.

[00:11:28.23]

Michael B.: I always was a tractor driver in the fields. I started, like I said, driving when I was four. I was hardly big enough—I wasn't even big enough to reach the clutch. So, you sit on the seat, and when you get ready to stop, I used to have to just jump down on the clutch, I was so little. But we always grew tobacco. We never grew shade tobacco, but we always grew sun tobacco, even back to my great-granddaddy Joe Brown. And even his father, which is Silas Brown. But we always, for years and years, grew tobacco from the late 1800s. I was the last one to grow tobacco in this county, and I stopped in 2006. My dad, we always has this thing. Like I was supposed to do better than my dad. But my daddy did do better than my granddaddy, my granddaddy did do better than his dad, but my dad, most of this you see round here is the hard work of my dad. So, be kinda hard to top, but I'm half smart. [Laughter] So, over the years, transitionin' from tobacco, this part of the year I do peas, and in the wintertime, I do greens. Mustards, turnips, collards. There was a time, like when I was growin' up, when it was pea time— peas, butter beans, if your friends come over, your cousins— everybody got to get a pan. You know? [Laughter] You're shellin' peas. Which now, I have a pea-sheller that I can shell a bushel of peas in five minutes. The Piggly-Wiggly local chains have been real good to me. Also, Quality Meat right here in Quincy. They treat me real good. They buy—most of their peas come from me. I take 'em to 'em sometimes three times a week, just dependin', sometimes four. And also, over the years, we've developed muscadine grapes, or the scuppernongs. I have, like, two and a half acres of 'em back there. We started out with just these four lines right here, and the way how we came up with this idea, everything me and my dad planted in that space back there, we tried to plant sweet potatoes, the deer

would eat 'em up. So, that property we weren't kinda doin' nothing with it, and we seen potential in these things. I just told my dad one day, I said, "What we need to do is just go ahead and plant the whole grove." It was kinda like one of those things, if you build it, they'll come? I could just feel somethin' about it. When those scuppernongs get ready, I never—I can't keep 'em. Eighty percent of 'em I sell just right here, just sometime on a Saturday you'll come out here, there'll be twenty cars just in and out, in and out, comin' to get 'em. I have a U-Pick if you want to, but ninety percent of the people just say, "Hey . . . " You know, 'cause it's so hot. But my vineyard is real clean, it's just be so hot. And some people just like the tradition of takin' they kids, showin' them somethin' that come off of a tree. I'm kinda now workin' on a program from the farm to the school, so that's really workin' out for me. This year, I'll be sellin' my products in the school system. So, that'll work out real good. The tobacco worked for my dad. You know, it's kinda like a sayin', "Well, what was good for my mama is good enough for me." Well, what was good for my dad wasn't good for me. My dad had to walk to school; I rode the bus. You understand? So, if you got a job every other Friday once a month, twice a month, once a month, every week, every Monday, somebody gonna cut you a check to say, "to the order so-and-so." Out here . . . I can grow the prettiest sweet potatoes. I can get the peas right there, just to pickin' them. A bunch of rain can come and it's all gone, just that fast. If you can't get in there and pick 'em, you can't get in there and pick' em, you know. It's a gamble. It's a joke. I like to tease people, I say, "I'll come out better takin' me sixty thousand dollars just goin' to Las Vegas and take a chance. I might win." Or I say, "At least when I lose there, I know I had fun, versus I got to farm all year. You put your money out there and then you losin' and you work hard and ain't got nothin'." But it

works out. I mean, the bottom line, I know there's a source of power that's greater than myself. All I can do is put the seed out there, you know, and He gives the increase. I do believe. I go out there and do what I's supposed to do. I've never seen it fail, and it always come through. It always works out some kinda way, and at the end of the rainbow, there's always a pot of gold or there's always a ram in the thicket. I mean, it works. I mean, it works for me.

[00:15:55.23]

Rebecca S.: When the people that worked in the barns—and you know what the barns looked like, you know—probably eleven on this farm. But when they converted from hand stringing to mechanical machines, when Dick would come home from school and after college, too, when he was there, he'd drive up and Dad would say, "Dick, come on. I gotta get you to fix this machine for me." He was really good at helping with machines. Then, later on, at that time—or earlier then—I wish I could remember dates better. But even if I'd written them down, I wouldn't be able to find them. Anyway. We had charcoal pits in the barns. When the tobacco is hanging on the strings, it had to be just right. We started off with charcoal pits in the barn, and then someone had to stay all night to be sure that was looked after. Then—but they converted to the gas little burners, and that still had to be monitored all the time. But at the demise of the tobacco, all of those things had to be gotten rid of, and the barns were no longer used except maybe to store hay or . . . I can't think of anything else, can you, Wendy?

Wendy: No, ma'am. [Laughter]

Rebecca S.: She has a better memory than I do.

Interviewer: So, the coal and the gas were to dry out—

Rebecca S.: It would bring it to the right temperature.

Interviewer: I see.

Rebecca S.: And you had to feel it, you had to see it, and it was a certain color that would turn.

Holly H.: And still be flexible enough to shape—

Rebecca S.: Oh, yeah, and not tear.

Holly H.: So not too dry.

Rebecca S.: When they got into the factory . . . 'cause you sort of, more or less, went through auctions to sell all this tobacco. But when it got into the factory, they could spread it out one leaf at the time, and cut—it cut something like the shape of a cigar that would wrap around the outside. And the filler, at that time we were doing this, the outside leaf, the center was raised in Cuba, the filler part. In Cuba. And then they raised some of the outside, too, but mainly they were . . . But when we got on different sides of Cuba, all the

Americans were sent off the island. Our filter, but was more or less the end of that, there were several things that worked against the demise of the tobacco.

[00:19:19.23]

Ronnie J.: It wasn't just, say, whether I liked it or disliked it. It was a way you survived. It was a way you survived. Like I said, most of my work in the farm and stuff, I always tried to help provide for my mom and my other brothers and sisters, 'cause it was pretty—it was rough. It was rough. It wasn't no cakewalk. I had a rough life. But I didn't have a rough life, 'cause I can look at some other people and look at their life and see how rough it were with them. They was havin' a rougher time than I were, simply because they was livin' on those farms. They was livin' on those farms. I witnessed, one time when I was about—I guess about ten, twelve, workin' in the tobacco—we worked, and the guy that I was toting tobacco for, he got mad. Because they was workin' by the piece then. You get a punch. He was contradictin' the guy that was givin' the punches out. And the boss man come out there and told him that you done got all you gone get. And the guy made a statement, "I'll go home." And the man told him at that time, "You'll go home? Where your home at?" Said, "Your home is somewhere ain't never been built." He said, "'Cause that house you live in is my house." I decided then, after I looked at it, and said, "I never want to live on nobody's place. I never want to really not have some of my own." So, my entire life, I started puttin' a little bit back, as they call, for hard times. I put stuff back for hard times. I always wanted a home of my own. I guess I was twenty . . . twenty-one years old when I got married. But I bought a house when I was right at nineteen, goin' on twenty. I bought that little section, a 28 by 40 house, I bought. And they brought it. It was

a pre-fabbed house. They brought it in, set it up, and I worked to get my own place. My grandmother gave me a spot of land, this little spot right here, to put my house on. I never wanted to be under nobody else's thumb, they tell me, "You got to go; you got to do this." So, I worked hard on the farm, not because I really loved it, that's the only thing I thought I could do. No, I knew there was other things out there, but I knew it was things that will feed me, take care of me, and help take care of my mom.

[00:22:49.22]

James B.: We had found there was a demand for lambs and goats in the South, but nobody was processin' them. That's why I built the plant, mainly to do lamb and goats. We start doin'—we were gonna do the ostriches and the emus and all that, and it never . . . it never did do very much. Matter of fact, I put a lot of money and a department there on the plant to do them, specially do them. U.S.D.A. required us to have a special-type unit to process 'em in, and it never did do anything. But the goat and lamb started out pretty good; not as well as the research we had done, we intended it to do, and we find out the biggest problem was, most of the people was people from other countries. They didn't want to pay the American price for it. They wanted them for cheaper than I could really afford to sell 'em to 'em. I just couldn't. But we tried to work with that, and I finally found some markets in Miami. I was doin' pretty good with sellin'. We were shippin' 'em down, and I had refrigerated trucks and all that stuff. We were shippin' 'em down there, and we were doin' okay. We did get enough hogs, but lambs and goats I was not able to get enough of 'em from this—even up here. I bought from people around Thomasville, Cairo, Bainbridge, Colquitt, all through these areas. Few people had a few goats, but it wasn't

enough to supply my demand. So, we start—I bought a large diesel truck with a long, tandem, goose-neck trailer. We start hauling goats and lambs out of Texas, 'cause I could buy 'em for ten, fifteen dollars a head, and I was payin' thirty, forty, fifty dollars for 'em 'round here, so I was doin' pretty good until the company in Texas opened up the slaughter plant. They basically just took the business from me, so I had to move away. I just closed it down, and I moved away eventually. But I stayed here until I was, like, about fifty years old before I ended up going to Atlanta. As far as I know, I was the first person to ever make a goat smoked sausage. I had them in the supermarkets. I had 'em in I.G.A.s and some of the Publix and Winn-Dixie stores, but they didn't sell very good. The time wasn't right. Now, people eating lamb and goat because they recognize it's healthier than eating the pork and the beef, so now they're eatin' it. So, now, you can sell it. I'm sellin' quite a bit here.

[*End of excerpts*]