



Kenneth Goss
Goss Farms Sorghum

Date: November 27, 2018
Location: Henagar, AL
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Length: Thirty-two minutes
Project: Southern Sugars

Annemarie Anderson: All right. Today is November 27th, 2018, it's a Tuesday, and I'm in Henagar, Alabama, with Mr. Kenneth Goss at his mother's home. Will you start off and introduce yourself for the recorder, give us your name and your birth date, please?

[00:00:20]

Kenneth Goss: Yes'm. I'm Kenneth Goss, born April 12, 1954.

[00:00:26]

Annemarie Anderson: Great. Let's start off and talk about growing up here in Henagar. Could you tell me a little bit about what it was like?

[00:00:38]

Kenneth Goss: It was just a great place to grow up. It was peaceful, lots of woods to hunt in at the time, and it was just really a good place. Good neighbors, always no problems, just a good neighborhood.

[00:01:04]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good!

[Chimes ringing. End Track 1]

[Begin Track 2]

[00:01:10]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay, we're back. So you were telling me a little bit about Henagar and this community. I assume you grew up in this house?

[00:01:17]

Kenneth Goss: Yes, ma'am.

[00:01:18]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay, cool. And you mentioned hunting. What were some of the things that you did growing up here? I mean, could you describe that?

[00:01:29]

Kenneth Goss: Other than hunting? [Laughter]

[00:01:31]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, yeah. Describe hunting and other activities.

[00:01:33]

Kenneth Goss: It was just small-game hunting and things like that. I just enjoyed being out, being in the woods, just peaceful. Of course, as a little guy, I liked to ride my bicycle up and down the country roads and get chased by dogs and things like that. [Laughter]
Normal things. Just hung out with friends who lived close by.

[00:02:01]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Can you tell me a little bit about your parents and what were their names and what were they like?

[00:02:08]

Kenneth Goss: Well, my dad was L.D. Goss, and he was an awesome guy, loved him greatly. And Mom, Willodean Goss, she was a great mom, still is. She's a good cook and just sweet as she can be.

[00:02:28]

Annemarie Anderson: What were some of the best things that she cooked when you were growing up?

[00:02:31]

Kenneth Goss: Oh, my.

[00:02:32]

Annemarie Anderson: And I guess now too.

[00:02:33]

Kenneth Goss: I guess I had to grow up on pintos and cornbread, fried potatoes, of course hot dogs and hamburgers.

[00:02:44]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good!

[00:02:45]

Kenneth Goss: That was some of my favorites, growing up.

[00:02:47]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Can you tell me a little bit about, I guess, your involvement early on in the sorghum-making and your family's history in it?

[00:02:57]

Kenneth Goss: Well, I started out just as a little kid just out playing in the field and helped cut off the cane seed at the time. I'd use a little pocket knife, and I would always come home with my finger bleeding, and Mother would tell me, "I'm gonna whip you if you don't quit cutting your finger." [Laughter] But just, you know, as a little guy. Then as I grew up, we started getting serious with it, and then I started doing real field work, doing the cane stripping and helping cut it down, loading it on the truck or trailer, whatever we used, and we'd bring it to the mill and everything. At a young age, that was more of what I helped do, instead of actually working at the syrup mill itself.

[00:03:56]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Could you talk a little bit about your family history? How long have y'all been making sorghum?

[00:04:03]

Kenneth Goss: Well, I know my dad made for over fifty-two years, I think, before he handed it down to me and my brother, and I think his dad made before him. How long, I'm not real sure. I know it goes back a ways, and then probably his uncle, my grandfather's uncle, I think, actually helped him get started. It just goes back in the family a long ways.

[00:04:39]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Well, could you talk a little bit about, I guess— what year did you and your brother kind of take over, do you remember?

[00:04:58]

Kenneth Goss: It was somewhere around 2005, something like that, in that neighborhood.

[00:05:07]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. And why did y'all decide to keep on making syrup?

[00:05:13]

Kenneth Goss: Well, we just enjoyed it. It was something at the time a lot of people wasn't doing, and it's just a time of year that we used to look forward to more than we do now, unfortunately. [Laughter] But it was just a special time for us, I guess.

[00:05:43]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Can you tell me a little bit—I guess I want to ask you some more technical questions, because I'm interested in, you know, the technical part of syrup-making as well. But I've been told that—and Miss Renee talked a little bit about this in her interview, about kind of how the ground has a lot to do with the sorghum and how it tastes.

[00:06:13]

Kenneth Goss: Yes, ma'am.

[00:06:14]

Annemarie Anderson: And then some other things. Could you talk a little bit about that? What's the soil like here in Henagar and what kind of seeds do you decide to use?

[00:06:27]

Kenneth Goss: Yes, ma'am. Well, we found—Dad always said, I'll put it that way [Laughter], he said kind of a sandy ground was the best ground to grow sorghum cane. We use the Sugar Drip or Honey Drip seed variety. We have used the M81 and, I think, the Dale variety. We have tried those, but mostly we stayed with the Honey Drip, the older seed that my dad had for years and years, and it always made the sweetest, best syrup, made a good volume more so than the others we had tried. But the soil definitely has a lot to do with it also. One thing, we make sure that anyone who brings any, we

make sure that they don't grow it on ground that has chicken litter or anything like that on it, because that definitely affects it and it will come out in the cooking. [Laughter]

[00:07:46]

Annemarie Anderson: Has that been a problem before, people using?

[00:07:48]

Kenneth Goss: Just once or twice when my dad did it. He actually had to shut down the process once or twice that I know of, because it was just really bad. [Laughtert]

[00:08:02]

Annemarie Anderson: That's something else. Could you kind of, I guess, walk us through, for somebody who's never seen a sorghum patch, they've never seen it harvested, could you talk a little bit about the cultivation and the harvesting of sorghum, kind of describe that process?

[00:08:22]

Kenneth Goss: From just preparing the ground through disking the land, turning the soil, and then we disk it again, and then we go in and plant it with—we just use the old-fashioned two-row Burch planters we've had for a long time. As the cane comes up, we more so used to, we haven't in the last few years for time's sake, but the best way to clean it is to use a hoe, just to go in and do it with a hoe and clean it out and chop it out, then use a Fowler's, I think. First time we would plow it, we would use a Fowler's, and

then when it gets up about eight or ten inches, we go in with just regular plows and just keep it really clean and nice, and as it grew, get the proper amount of rain and everything, then it usually would just grow into full-grown stalks, be probably eight, eight to ten foot, something like that. Then we keep an eye on the seed. When the seed started ripening, we could tell about the time it would need to start being ready to harvest by the color of the seed, by the texture, and by the leaves also. At the bottom, they would start turning real brown and maybe up a couple of feet. Usually at that time, it's ready to harvest. It's normally about a four-month cycle, I think, if I remember correct. But just a few weeks can make a little difference in it. At that point, that's when we go in and take all the leaves, strip all the leaves off of it, go back and cut it down. And the way we do it, we would just get armfuls at a time as we cut it down, and keep the heads together, and we take machetes, cut all the heads off just one time. After we got older, we learned we could do it a lot faster that way. Then we load it on our trucks and bring it up to the mill, and we'd stack it around these little stobs, looks like little Indian teepees [Laughter], sort of, and it would be there till we got ready to process it, to make it.

[00:11:15]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! So I think this has come out in some of the things that you guys already talked about, but I've also kind of noticed that being here while you guys were cooking, you do a lot of things like with attention to heritage and attention to the details that have been passed down. Are there any labor-saving, you know, I guess things that you guys have picked up on, or inventions that you've made to kind of help

the process, or does that kind of not matter to you? You'd rather kind of—interested in doing it the way that you were taught?

[00:11:58]

Kenneth Goss: That's a good question. We're always open to better ourselves, to make it easier. If there's an easier way, sure, we'd rather to do it that way, just for the convenience, I guess, and we don't make quite as much—well, we don't make near as much as what my dad made. Sometimes he would make maybe six weeks at a time, just every day except Sunday, where we just maybe do it on very small scale compared to him, and that is the reason we haven't invested a lot of time and money into try to better it, because we just don't do it that much, though my wife, she would rather [Laughter] do it in a big way, but that's just where we're at right now.

[00:12:57]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! And you kind of mentioned this and I kind of want to go back a little bit, but could you kind of describe what it was like when your dad was cooking when you were a kid? What were those days like?

[00:13:13]

Kenneth Goss: Well, I guess the whole phrase of “That was the good ole days” would apply here, because it was just really good times back then. Of course, it was more of a simple life, I guess. It wasn't rush, rush, and things going on all the time that you had to

do. It was just—hard to explain, I guess, really, other than it was just great. [Laughter] It was just a good time.

[00:13:57]

Annemarie Anderson: Were there people in the community who came out?

[00:14:02]

Kenneth Goss: Mm-hm.

[00:14:01]

Annemarie Anderson: Who were some of those folks? Were they, like, neighbors or relatives or—

[00:14:08]

Kenneth Goss: Both, actually. They would come out. They'd come to visit, come and help us work. Used to, we would just sit around and watch TV, eat popcorn or peanuts and stuff, and just talk, and everybody had everything to say about everything, where nowadays, most folks is too busy to even visit much. It's just not like it used to be, at least not here [Laughter] in this area. Although we still have good neighbors, a lot of them has lived here for years that we really don't know.

[00:14:52]

Annemarie Anderson: Could you tell me a little bit about, I guess—your dad cooked for the public, too, right?

[00:15:00]

Kenneth Goss: Right.

[00:15:00]

Annemarie Anderson: Could you talk a little bit about that, maybe some of the growers or just some of the folks who would bring their cane to you guys?

[00:15:07]

Kenneth Goss: Well—

[00:15:10]

Annemarie Anderson: If there are people you remember.

[00:15:12]

Kenneth Goss: Right. Well, lots of the neighbors. My goodness. There's so many [Laughter], just almost everyone in the community at one time, when I was younger, would bring cane.

[00:15:44]

Annemarie Anderson: That's okay. I think another thing is kind of just the general, you know, outlook of Sand Mountain, and what was the importance of sorghum here? How do people kind of like react to that as a product?

[00:16:03]

Kenneth Goss: Are you talking about now or in the past?

[00:16:06]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, in the past and now too.

[00:16:09]

Kenneth Goss: Well, I think it was a very important part in the past, because it's not really just a ritzy community around here, you know. It was pretty—well, it's just country, country folks, and they depended on sorghum for a lot of—for sugar, for their cooking, of course just for buttered biscuits, you know. [Laughter] That would be some of them's favorite breakfast. And now it's more of a—I'm not sure how to say it. They still like it, but it's more of a thing they can look back and say we used to do, you know. It's just not common to find it anymore that's homemade and pure, you know, that don't have all the byproducts in it, whatever. It's just—

[00:17:26]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Could you tell me a little bit, I guess, coming back now—sorry. I keep moving around.

[00:17:32]

Kenneth Goss: Yes, ma'am.

[00:17:33]

Annemarie Anderson: But could you talk a little bit about—or describe for somebody who won't ever see it what your setup looks like when you guys are making sorghum? Sorghum syrup.

[00:17:46]

Kenneth Goss: Right, right, what it looks like.

[00:17:50]

Annemarie Anderson: You talked a little bit about the teepees of cane, but I guess what does your mill look like and what does your shed look like, and how does that process of—describe the process, I guess, of making syrup from juice to just the end product.

[00:18:10]

Kenneth Goss: Okay. Well, we have our syrup mill, the grinding part, set up, and I think our mill is, if I remember correct, it's a Columbus number 27, the size. It's not a great big one, but it's a power mill. It's not a mule mill. We've got a trough hooked up to it, with a belt, leather. I think it's somewhat old leather like they use in the cotton gins, and that's what the stalks go up after it's ground. The cane, as we grind it, the juice runs through the

bottom of the mill and out in a trough in a 55-gallon drum, goes down a—I think it's about a one-inch black plastic pipe. It's kind of gravity-fed down to the syrup mill, where the cooking process goes, into another 55-gallon drum, and it is strained several times in that process. It goes from the drum at the syrup pan, I think goes out on a pan, I think it's a 12-foot—it's approximately 12-foot pan by 4-foot, and it has the maze, like my wife was explaining. The juice runs through it. It goes through the process. The pan is setting on a—it's part-rock and part-block foundation, the furnace, and we use propane gas to do the cooking with, as to where in the early days when I was younger, my dad used wood. He'd use slabs, and we had to cut the wood and everything and get it all ready, and, lord, that was a lot of work. [Laughter] That was a lot of work. But that's one of the things we have now that's more convenient, you know. The furnace has, of course, the chimney, whatever you call it, there, and we can adjust the heat by, of course, by adjusting the amount of gas we go through. Of course, thankfully, my brother has to take care of all that, because I'm not that familiar with that area. [Laughter] And we just have everything set up, and it's a little building with screens around it so the smoke and steam will go out and not hinder too much in the cooking. We still have to use fans over the pan sometimes, especially when it's windy. But it's just a simple little country operation.

[00:21:33]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! Yeah, you're doing great. [Laughter] Could you—well, how did you guys, I guess, split up the division of labor, as far as like how did you become kind of the guy who grows the sorghum and how did Mr. Larry become the cooker? How did you guys decide to—

[00:21:57]

Kenneth Goss: Okay. Well, in my nature, I have never been one to be still very long at one time. I either have to be doing something, going. So I chose to work around the mill, do the grinding and stuff. My brother, who has, I guess, more patience about that [Laughter], about standing at the pan and doing the cooking, because when you commit to that, you're there all day, I mean till start to finish. I guess that's something I never really—I really never had that big of interest in, although I should have. [Laughter] It would have helped him out, I guess. I think I could do it. I've helped him out just a little bit at a time, but it's just—I don't know. I'd rather be out doing something else.

[Laughter]

[00:22:53]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Could you tell me, what's your favorite part of the sorghum operation?

[00:23:02]

Kenneth Goss: Selling the finished project. [Laughter] No. Seriously, the cooking part. I love to smell the syrup cooking, and I'm always going and sampling it, making sure it's good. [Laughter] But that's my favorite part, is just as we're doing the cooking process.

[00:23:29]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! What does sorghum smell like, for people who won't ever be able to smell it cooking?

[00:23:36]

Kenneth Goss: Oh, wow. I don't know how to describe it. It's just a very pleasant—I don't know how to explain it. It just smells so good, you know, it's hard to explain. Sorry.

[00:23:56]

Annemarie Anderson: That's okay. Let's see. Do you have any, I guess—I mean, obviously you've learned most of what you guys do from your family, but were there any other growers and producers in the area or even farther, if there are people, who you have kind of had a relationship with, that you guys kind of talked about making sorghum together?

[00:24:30]

Kenneth Goss: Together, you say?

[00:24:31]

Annemarie Anderson: Well, I mean, you kind of like discussed it or you had some sort of relationship with them.

[00:24:39]

Kenneth Goss: Well, some of our neighbors, the Owens family, I think they actually worked with Dad for a few years. I'm not sure how many. In fact, they was partners for a while. Then when they went their way, they started their own little—well, I don't guess it was small, but they started their own mill close by, and they made for several years. I remember that they did that, and I think my cousin, one of my cousins, W.C., didn't they help us for a couple of years, I think, if I remember? Had to ask Mom about that one. [Laughter] And Mr. Simms, they were several people that had partnered with Dad back when they would make for so long at a time, and it was good to have people that would work like that and help you. I couldn't name all of them. I'm really not sure. But they was lots of folks that helped out back then.

[00:25:59]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! That's great! I guess I have two last questions for you and then let you open up to anything you want to add. But my first question is kind of what's—I think why is it important that you are just like still making sorghum and why is sorghum-making important to you?

[00:26:38]

Kenneth Goss: Well, it's really hard to explain. It's just been in the family so long, it's just hard to lay it down, although we're maybe going to do that at some point. But it's just something you learned to enjoy. So many people, they just love to talk about it, you know, and how at one point in their lives, someone in their family had made and things, and it makes it just go back to their childhood, thinking, a nostalgic thing, I guess

[Laughter], if that's the right word. But it'll always be special to me. Whether we continue to do it for a long time or if we don't, it'll just always be special, a special time of the year and all that comes with it, stress and all this, but it's really awesome when we do it.

[00:27:48]

Annemarie Anderson: I bet. Can you tell me a little bit, too—so this is one big thing that I forgot that I wanted to ask you about. Do you guys cook for the public? Could you talk about how you've kind of seen like that change since you're maybe a boy into the present, and kind of the people who are producers now and why they decide to make sorghum or to grow it and make syrup?

[00:28:23]

Kenneth Goss: I'm not sure. Could you explain that?

[00:28:27]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah! Yeah! Well, here. Let me break it down. Who, I guess, who are the folks now who decide to grow sorghum cane, and why do they—what are their motivations?

[00:28:43]

Kenneth Goss: Okay, okay. Actually, most of the folks we're making for now just knew that at one time it was a profitable business and they just wanted to try it to see if they

could grow it, and so lots of them, they've just continued year after year because they like it, even though there's a lot of work and a lot of finances goes into the labor and everything, but they just wanted to see if they could do it, I think, is actually the motivation. They just wanted to see how it did work.

[00:29:27]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! How did they get connected with you guys? How do growers get connected with y'all?

[00:29:34]

Kenneth Goss: A lot of it's by word of mouth, and a lot of it, my wife, I think she has a Facebook page for sorghum. I think probably that. It's just word of mouth, mostly, I think, is where they just want to try it and see if they like it, you know.

[00:30:05]

Annemarie Anderson: That's good! And I guess my last question for you, then, is what do you want to see for the future of the Goss family sorghum syrup, in a perfect world?

[00:30:24]

Kenneth Goss: [Laughter] A perfect world? Wow. That'd be nice. That's a hard one to expound on, because we are considering not making anymore after this year, for many, many reasons. It's not just because we want to quit, but there's a lot of things has changed. The workforce has changed. It makes it easier when you can make a profit, and

things has changed that we're really not doing that much on profit, on being profitable, and you just can't always live on the nostalgic thing, you know. [Laughter] So in a perfect world, I would like to see it just go on forever. [Laughter] Because it's just—it'll always be special, whether we do it or not at the time. It will be to me, anyway.

[00:31:39]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Well, thank you very much for talking with me.

[End of interview]