

Interview of: Lorene Gatton.
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interview Date: August 23, 2005

August 25, 2005

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Interviewee: Lorene Gatton
Gatton Farms – Bremen, KY
August 23, 2005

[Begin Lorene Gatton]

0:00:00.0

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on August 23, 2005 and I'm at Bremen, Kentucky at the Gatton Family Home with Charles Gatton Jr.'s mother, Mrs. Gatton and would you mind saying your name and birthday please, ma'am?

0:00:20.9

Lorene Gatton: I'm Lorene Gatton and my birthdate is August 9th and I was born in 1920 and I just had a birthday not long ago. *[Laughs]*

0:00:31.6

AE: Happy birthday.

0:00:32.5

LG: Thank you.

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AE: I can hold that.

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LG: And I have a twin sister who's living.

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AE: Where were you born?

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LG: I was born in Owensboro [Kentucky].

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AE: Okay; and so you were just telling me that when you came here to this homestead it was the first time that you lived on a farm.

0:00:45.4

LG: Yes; my father was with L & N Railroad for 50 years and he used to be the ticket agent in Owensboro and Lewisport is where my husband came to Lewisport to teach agriculture in '38

and I had graduated from high school in '38. So my--that's how we met. We went to--my twin sister and I went to Bowling Green, about a year and then later my husband and I married in '39.

0:01:16.9

AE: And then you moved out here in '43 did you say?

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LG: Forty-three--his mother died, but he taught, too, at Lewisport and then during the war at Hawesville and Lewisport and so during the--his lunch hour to--from Hawesville to Lewisport we later moved to Hawesville.

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AE: And then you also were telling me that this house was built in 1906?

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LG: Yes; the big old house burned in 1906 and this house was built back in 1906. And my husband's grandfather and grandmother built the house back. And so--

0:02:01.4

AE: So when you were a newlywed and your husband wanted to get into the ham business, can you tell me something--some stories from those early days?

0:02:10.6

LG: We moved over here in '40--1943 and it was during the War and my--actually the War, my husband taught Veterans Training at Calhoun, Kentucky, for four years and saw one of his veterans and he decided to cure some hams. He cured 200 hams and it rained all that spring and they all ruined. So then later my husband decided to try again and he tried 2,000 and he had--his father had always cured hams; it was salt cured. So he tried the sugar cured, which the hams weren't so salty. So then he had different restaurants that wanted his hams, so that's how he really started.

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AE: And do--do you remember--were you part of that process? I mean did he have you helping out?

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LG: Yes; I--I worked at the ham house oh until I was 76. **[Laughs]** I decided--my mother was in a nursing home so I--it was kind of hard on me, so I--I liked to work in the back and make sure

all the packages were--looked good and we started out real small and Charlie got out of--
graduated from Murray and moved on the farm. He married while he was in college and so he
wanted to--my husband just cured the whole hams and the slabs of bacon and the--made sausage
and then Charlie wanted to start processing slicing hams and--which he did and we had just--it
was one--it--a compressor that just would package one--package a ham at a time with a foot
press. **[Laughs]** It was really--and it was real slow and I would scrape the hams while Charlie
would package the ham and would slide the ham and then we started at Christmas time and built
up our business and so now the times have changed. People don't want a whole ham; they want
slices and want it cooked, and so we--Charlie cooks a lot of hams and they even cook center cuts
for packaged ham with the red-eye gravy, which we didn't do years ago. **[Laughs]**

0:05:08.4

AE: And what do you think about all of the products he's added to the--the line of foods?

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LG: I'm really proud that he has really built up the business and has done a good job and
worked really hard.

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AE: Yeah; it's quite an operation over there.

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LG: Sure is.

0:05:26.2

AE: And so growing up--when Charlie was growing up and you had the ham business in full swing, did y'all--did you cook a lot here at home and did y'all eat ham or bacon every day or--

0:05:35.3

LG: Well we had ham--we--I cooked every day, and we always had a big breakfast and we always--I never knew for sure who--how many I would have to cook because Charles' dad, after four--I kept house; it was his home, but anyway, we--four years and then he built the house across the road and remarried. But he would always eat with us and I never knew who they were going to bring in, so we always had a big dinner at Noon.

0:06:12.4

AE: What kind of things did you enjoy making for your family?

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LG: Well—we always had country ham and--and corn pudding is one of my favorites and we would have the--they just liked potatoes and green beans as their favorite foods. **[Laughs]** So Charles' dad was real colorful, and it was his grandfather that settled here and then his mother married the Gatton's so it was really the Wittner Farm and so they said the original--Charles' grandfather's or his grandmother's father, his grandfather, his--they had 12 children and he was building a barn, and he had a heart attack so the grandmother married the--Marion Gatton, so anyway she got her part and then--and Charles said Marion Gatton in buying out the other heirs, one of the heirs wanted his money in gold. **[Laughs]** That was about in the--well it goes back to 1840.

0:07:42.7

AE: My goodness.

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LG: That was in the 1860s probably.

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AE: That's a lot of history.

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LG: Uh-huh.

0:07:50.1

AE: And your son was telling me about some memories about hog killings here on the farm and things like that in the--in the winter time.

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LG: Yes.

0:07:58.7

AE: Can you talk about a little bit of that?

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LG: Oh yes; they always killed the hogs and they'd kill about 10 to 12 hogs and they'd have poles they would--my husband did the killing of the hogs and then they'd hang up... I don't remember... across our back and--and then it was by the day they helped come in--some of the neighbors would come in, yeah. They made their own lard and I thought it was [**Laughs**] a

terrible day. I wasn't brought up with it but they were used to it. His mother was--she was a wonderful person. We--I knew her three years; she--we were married three years before she passed away.

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AE: And so you had never experienced a hog killing in Owensboro, huh?

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LG: No; and they milked cows and so I--when we came over here it was Charles' father and two brothers and Charles and **[Laughs]** see I was just--just 23 and so it was quite--they had a cook stove and we--I always lived in town and they'd bring in all this milk. **[Laughs]** Oh funny; they'd strain milk and his mother sold milk and butter and of course, I learned to make the butter. I--I froze it; I didn't sell it. **[Laughs]** When I finally learned how and that's the only thing I did with the cows and then they quit milking. And then when Charlie was little he decided he liked bought milk, so Charles' father thought I was terrible because I would have--they would come by with the milk truck and I would buy pasteurized milk off the truck. **[Laughs]** Our home pasteurizer of the milk wasn't all that good, so--

0:10:07.3

AE: Farm life was a lot different from what you were used to.

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LG: Oh yes.

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AE: It sounded like you took to it though. Did you get to where you enjoyed it?

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LG: Yes; I've lived--I've lived here 62 years and my husband has been deceased five years, so it was his home and he enjoyed the farming and--and did a lot of--of remodeling of the farm and adding to the farm.

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AE: Is there anything from those old days that you miss?

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LG: I really liked the old fashioned buttermilk. [*Laughs*] That was so good; it had chunks of butter in it. It was really good. But my husband didn't like buttermilk. His mother always had

such good buttermilk and she could cook on the cove stove angel--angel food cakes or just everything. She was a wonderful cook.

0:11:06.8

AE: Did y'all raise your own vegetables?

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LG: Yes; oh we always had a garden and canned and froze them, and then later--she would freeze beef--pork tenderloin when they'd kill hogs and--and they would even can sausage, but of course we had a meat house; they tore it--it was torn down when they built our garage. And it was--the meat would hang in the meat house and if you wanted some of the ham, you always ate your shoulders first because the hams would age and they were more tender later. So that was always--you ate the shoulders. *[Laughs]* It was quite a time.

0:11:58.2

AE: Can you--

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LG: But I enjoyed it.

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AE: Can you tell me a little bit more about your husband's personality and what kind of man he was?

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LG: Oh well, he--he was always involved and was head of the Cattle Association. He loved the cattle and then he would show cattle at the fairs and got our children involved, although he was the one that really got the steers ready for the shows and he loved that. And in the summer time he would go into the fairs and take the cattle and they went to the state fair and won quite a few honors. And then on show day, I would take the children and we'd go to the fair on the show days to--in our--I have two girls, Charlotte and Susanne and Charlie, so they would show their steers that we were... then I stayed home on the farm and sold the hams. People would come by and buy whole hams or a slab of bacon or you know I didn't--we didn't have any processed sliced hams and--until Charlie got out of school.

0:13:24.8

AE: Those are some wonderful memories.

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LG: Yes; there is.

0:13:27.0

AE: And this is a beautiful--beautiful farm.

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LG: Well thank you.

0:13:30.0

AE: I imagine it's been a wonderful place to live all these years.

0:13:33.2

LG: Oh it really has; we've enjoyed it and Charles loved his home. He didn't--he was on the School Board for 22 years--Middlesboro County School Board and he was involved in all of the civic activities and church. So he was busy. **[Laughs]** And I was involved with the 4-H; we worked with the 4-H for 15 years and we were a busy farm family. **[Laughs]** And he was involved with the county and the Extension Agent and Farm Bureau some.

0:14:24.4

AE: Do you have anything about your husband in the--the ham business in your time here that you would like for him to be remembered by or something you want people to know about him?

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LG: Well he was--he really was interested in producing a good sugar-cured ham because most hams when he grew up—it was [a] salt cure ham and--and so he really experimented and was at the University of Kentucky. He graduated in '38; he had meat courses and so he was really proud of the ham he started. He got a lot of the business and tried to improve over the years.

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AE: And now your name is all over the world.

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LG: So anyway--

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AE: The Gatton family--

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LG: So anyway he started it all. Of course, they've always had hams here, but they used to be pretty salty [*Laughs*] from what I understand. After he started curing them, he used the white sugar and brown sugar and made it more desirable and not so salty. You know I'm sure there are a lot of incidents that I haven't thought of yet. [*Laughs*]

0:15:53.6

AE: Well I appreciate you relaying the memories that you have shared. It's--it's a really nice thing to get to visit with you. I didn't know you were here until your son mentioned it; so--

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LG: Well yeah; I appreciate you coming. How did you know about the--the ham business and farm and how did you find out about it or--

0:16:14.0

AE: Well I work for an organization called the Southern Foodways Alliance and my job is to speak with families like yours and collect the family traditions and--and the old ways of doing things and producing food and--and the history attached to that. And we're having an event in

Louisville next week and using many bacons made by many western Kentucky producers, and so I came to interview the families who are making the bacon for the event and capture that history.

0:16:45.6

LG: Oh I see; uh-hm.

0:16:46.9

AE: Yeah.

0:16:48.2

LG: But my husband would be amazed today of the different varieties of bacon that Charlie is curing because he just believed in one kind--the hickory and you know smoked. **[Laughs]** Of course, he would--he always used the hickory wood. He would get the hickory wood and you know and--and smoke the hams and he never used any substitutes for the hickory because the hams were always... and the bacon and sausage smoked.

0:17:28.6

AE: Now Charles, Jr. has all these crazy flavors.

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LG: Yes; he does.

0:17:32.8

AE: They sound good though. [*Laughs*] I can't wait to try them. Do you have a flavor--one of his new flavors that you like? Have you tried many of them?

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LG: Well I think the--I've tried them all but I like the original better. [*Laughs*] Of course, the pepper is good when you're seasoning green beans and it's good to use that and the hickory but those other flavors are unique and good, but I guess I'm too old-fashioned and don't fall for a lot of stuff.

0:18:09.5

AE: Not what you're used to. [*Laughs*]

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LG: Don't tell him-- [*Laughs*]

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AE: That's good though; there's nothing wrong with that.

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LG: I know--I have opinions as well as he has his opinions.

0:18:28.5

AE: Well thank you for speaking with me, Mrs. Gatton; I sure do appreciate it.

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LG: I appreciate you coming in.

0:18:35.1

[End Lorene Gatton]