



Reed Falkner

Falkner Farms

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Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here in Oxford, Mississippi. It is July 5, 2023. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

Reed Falkner: I'm Reed Falkner, and I operate Falkner Farms.

Sarah Rodriguez: And just for the record, can you tell me your birth date?

Reed Falkner: October 26, 1989.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And you were born and grew up around here in Oxford. Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Reed Falkner: Yeah. So I was born and raised here in Oxford. Majority of my life was on this farm, in a sense. I went to Oxford High School—a lot of background with sports and livestock, and moved on through high school onto college over at Delta State University.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And so you grew up on the farm? When did the farm get started?

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Reed Falkner: Yes. So, we grew up here on the farm, and it hasn't always ran cattle and chickens like we do now, but at one time we were raising cattle, running the cow-calf operation. We switched over—the market dropped out, so we switched over to runnin horses. We had horses out here, and so we ride and got into that a little bit, and then ended up switching ultimately back to cattle. So, I always had some hand in some type of livestock dwelling.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure. And so, you grew up on the farm. What was that like, being a child

on the farm?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, it was fun. We were always riding around with my dad. We'd go to this place or another place where he had some cattle, and just always out and about. So, it was a different lifestyle in the sense of there's always something going on that has to be done, which was at the time, as a kid or growing up, you're like, "Oh man! Not again!" But, looking back on it, it was something that was highly valued.

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Sarah Rodriguez: What kind of stuff were you doing on the farm in terms of helping out when you were younger? And how did that change?

Reed Falkner: Yeah. So, startin out we were just riding around, just taggin along, not doin too much, just checking out, having eyeballs on some things. But that changed as we grew up, we'd be more, hands on deck, fixin fences, working cattle, moving panels, hooking up trailers, all the day-to-day stuff that kind of goes on now, as we grew and got more comfortable, kind of took more part in that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who did you grow up with? Who was in your house?

Reed Falkner: So, it's my mom and dad, and I have one older brother, and so that's four—a little unit out here running around. [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: In this house?

Reed Falkner: In this house right here, yep. We moved out here—I think it was 1996. I believe.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, you were still pretty young.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, I was still young. So yeah, a majority of my life was out here, yeah.

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Sarah Rodriguez: When you were younger, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up? Was it focused on farming?

Reed Falkner: I don't know if I knew exactly, but farming was always around. I was very involved; my brother and I both were in sports, so growing up, you always have that dream of being a professional athlete like every kid I think that gets into it does. That's where a lot of our focus was. But just having experience to be on the farm and see how things operate. Just always—never looked at it like a fallback plan or a future career, but it was just more of a trade at the time.

Sarah Rodriguez: What sports did you play?

Reed Falkner: So, when we grew up, we played all of them. We played basketball, football, soccer, baseball. I mean, it was just—

Sarah Rodriguez: I feel like it's through the calendar year, just whatever season it was.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, I mean we were just always busy playing, just being active. Friends were involved, we were involved, so it just was a fit.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Your brother as well?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, my brother as well. So, he ended up playing basketball. He went to

college for basketball and played professionally overseas, and I ended up going to college for football, so he used the sports for education and, you know... did that right. [laughs]

Sarah Rodriguez: That's great. Could you tell me a bit about what food was like growing up? What you were eating, kind of what your involvement was in food.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, I mean we were always eating. We were always big into beef, but it was just a prototypical household here. I mean we were conscious about what we were eating. We had a garden down there that we worked, we'd pull out in the summertime, had vegetables and that sort of thing. I mean, you'd occasionally run in, if you're on sporting events or something like that, you'd grab something quick to eat, but for the majority, everything home cooked meals, helping out, and just aware of what we were bringing in. I wouldn't say as much now as we are aware as we were then, but that has shifted due to what we do, I believe.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, different workload, I imagine.

Reed Falkner: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. What kind of crops were y'all growing? Was it different from what you were growing in your garden?

Reed Falkner: No. We never really ran row crops or just big-ag crops. Ours was always just garden, and that was always a deal, you know? But it would be peas, beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, squash. Just your prototypical home garden: watermelon, cantaloupe one time.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's a good variety.

Reed Falkner: It was a good variety, yeah absolutely. And you learn by doing it. At that point in time, a lot of it was by hand, and so you learned the work and the prep and everything that goes into managing and up keeping a garden on a small scale. You know, just like a home scale, so you appreciate the more work as far as producing that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Is the garden still here?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, we still got it right down there. It's just at the foot of the hill. It's done pretty good this year; [laughs] a lot of snap peas. [sp] [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Were your parents going to market? How were y'all getting, especially your livestock, out?

Reed Falkner: For the most part at that time, my dad had a career. He was nursing home administrator. He retired 32 years in, I believe, and my mom was on campus—the university at Memory House, and she was with the federal government for a little while, so they both had careers of their own. We weren't really processing any beef at that time. We were just running the market values of things—a lot of buy and sell cows, calves, that sort of thing.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who were you all selling to?

Reed Falkner: We'd go to just individual farmers around town, sometimes at Stockyard and Como and different things like that. But we didn't really get into processing beef like we do now until probably about maybe eight years ago, six to eight years ago something like that.

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Growing up, that wasn't our thing. Growing up, it was more just stockers and trading, that type, playing those markets.

Sarah Rodriguez: Take me through... You said you finished high school, you go on to Delta State. What are you studying there? What is that like? Was that kind of like leaving home?

Reed Falkner: Yeah. I mean, it was an eye opener going there and getting introduced to a collegiate athletic experience while trying to manage being away from home as far as what comes with that, and then your education. So, all that at first was, it was a pretty good adjustment for me, but as time goes along you figure out how to make it work and what works best for you.

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When I went there, I was thinking about physical therapy as a career, so my undergrad was in exercise science. So, I ran that four-year course, and ran four years of football, and applied for PT school. I didn't get in to two different schools, so I started my grad school at Delta State and tried again and got interviews again but did not get in. So, that right there kinda, "Here we go again kinda changing paths." But graduated with my master's in sports administration. So, we were kind of aiming some sort of maybe coaching or teaching or something in that sport performance field. That's kind of where I was gearing up for [laughs] at the time.

Sarah Rodriguez: What happened after you finished grad school?

Reed Falkner: I finished grad school, and then I ended up meeting my now wife, Elizabeth, and I moved around. One of my roommates was from San Diego, California, so I moved out there with him for just a short stint, knowing that wasn't going to be long term, but worked in a sports performance gym there and got a great exposure to a lot of different things

that I hadn't really seen in that realm. So, that's where I was gearing up towards.

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From there I went to Atlanta with Elizabeth, and we got there, and I was running a fitness gym there. I was a fitness director at one of those spots. And again, just not really long term, just kind of at the “need” kind of deal—“we need this right now”—and then came back here to Oxford and got on with, um...

Sarah Rodriguez: Around when was that?

Reed Falkner: Our getting back here was, I think, in 2015. Yeah, so it was about two years of—2016 is when it was, and I spent about a year just kind of bouncing around, got back here and ended up getting the head coaching job at Coffeeville High School, which is just right down the road, and I stuck that out through COVID. Once COVID came, it kind of changed a lot of stuff for a lot of people.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure, I imagine especially in the schools.

Reed Falkner: Oh yeah. I mean, that's kind of a joke I tell the kids: It was hard enough getting ‘em there to practice while they were at school. When they were at home, [laughs] there was no shot. I was driving busses to pick ‘em up and stuff like that, so when that came around, I transitioned out and onto the farm.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, you're full time on the farm now?

Reed Falkner: Full time on the farm, yep. Left that and started full time on the farm then.

That was 2020, is when COVID came, and so I started full time here on the farm that first year and it stuck with it ever since, so I'm coming up on year four.

Sarah Rodriguez: Were you helping out on the farm while you were coaching?

Reed Falkner: I was, yeah. When I was in Oxford and there at Coffeerville, I was helping out, just being a part, whether it be the weekends or after work one day and stuff like that, I was still pretty heavily involved with them.

Sarah Rodriguez: What was it like leaving Mississippi for that time? I mean, going to California and then jumping all the way across the country to Atlanta.

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Reed Falkner: Yeah, I mean, it was a unique time in the sense of, I've been away from home. I mean, it was six to seven years, I guess, through all my college education and then going to the West Coast side of the United States. It was different in the sense of cultural adaption, you know, adapting there. But I did have people there that I knew and kind of had like a little home base, so it wasn't as difficult of a transition as you might think. And that was really—that was a really good time. Like I said, I got a lot of experience working there and seeing different places of the world I've never seen—I mean the country—and being a part of that. And then going to Atlanta, again, same kind of scenario: I had someone I knew, and there was a home base again. We could come back and just kind of figure out what was going on for that day or what we're kind of dealing with and then go back out. But there was times, yeah, it was absolutely tough. It was absolutely tough; it wasn't a cakewalk.

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But, finding a job while you're there, and getting into that, and trying to get your feet wet, and adjusted—so, there was definitely a curve there that was difficult, but all in all, it was pretty great experience.

Sarah Rodriguez: And did you during that time know you were going to come back to Oxford?

Reed Falkner: I did not. I knew I wasn't going to be in California forever. I wasn't going to be there long. That was just kind of one of those after graduation, let's see what we can do out here. Maybe this could open up and find a connection here and just kind of keep networking. In Atlanta, I knew I'd be there a little while. It didn't pan out as long as we wanted to be. I don't know. You could say that, but it was something where we were able to get back together and then kind of plan how we want to go about moving forward.

Sarah Rodriguez: Coming back here to Oxford, what was that transitioning kinda back to something familiar, but you're different...

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Reed Falkner: Yeah. I mean, it was fine. This is where you grew up, so it's always a sense of familiarity there, and comfort, because you do know the landscape and the town and the community and that sort of thing, so that made it easier. Now, as far as transitioning occupations or careers, yeah, that was where it was a little bit more difficult. Coming back here, and then we were just kind of in limbo for a little while. We got married in 2018, and it was earlier that year that I got the job at Coffeeville. So, we were just kind of gearing up for that, and I had *no* idea what I was walking into, you know? I was teaching and coaching.

Sarah Rodriguez: What did you teach?

Reed Falkner: My certification was physical education, right? Typical coach/PE deal, but over there you kind of wear a little bit more hats than that one. So, I was proctoring Spanish; [laughs] I was proctoring visual arts; and I had the PE class.

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So that, actually, the class was online through Zoom at that time, or through Delta State, so the teachers I actually knew. So, that was—[laughs]—it was a challenge there because Spanish is obviously a challenge for everybody who doesn't speak at the time, you know? But it was good. I mean there was ups and downs over there and in that new occupation, but all in all we made it work, and the kids were the focus, and it was just something that I don't think I'll ever forget. Yeah, it was a good time.

Sarah Rodriguez: So, transitioning to full-time farming, what has that been like? Has that been very familiar? Have there been any challenges with that?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, there was a lot that was familiar just with the livestock side of things. Now, there was a lot of change, too. So, I came back here, and we had one girl at the time—one kid, one daughter—and we were coming in, and COVID is when I got here, 2020. I had my next little girl was coming, so we were gonna have two of those, so that's *always* on your mind.

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And we were starting to try and start a business up. It always had kinda been a hobby and something we've always done and been familiar with, so that brought a lot of challenges. So,

what I did was I focused on our chickens, our egg layers, and tried to grow that volume. And put together business strategy; didn't try to grow too fast too soon, just kind of grow into it and made sure that I had vendors where I could sell the eggs to. So, that was difficult. I mean, yeah, you're pretty much not cold calling, because in this town I knew different people and so I was able to meet with them and talk about the possibility of bringing eggs in and that sort of thing. And most people were really receptive. They were very supportive. They supported us, and we're thankful for that.

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But you know, as you grow, and as you just hit different obstacles along the way, you have to overcome and try to grow your business and clientele. So, it was a challenging time, but it was rewarding time as well. And just to see the support from your community, 1) to put your product in their stores, and then, 2) the customers who keep this business afloat for them to support and buy your product and continue to buy. So, that's been pretty cool to see and watch that develop.

Sarah Rodriguez: I can imagine.

Reed Falkner: Yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you hear first about the Oxford Community Market?

Reed Falkner: We were a part of—our first market was the Midtown Market on Saturdays with Aileen Bost. We started that and had a still a part of that, and that kind of opened our eyes to the farmers markets, and as we kind of started to grow, we looked for different avenues and markets to kind of be a part of, and then we stumbled upon the Oxford Community Market with Betsy Chapman.

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I started there, I think it was the winter market; I don't know the year, maybe '19 or '20, the COVID era, maybe right around there is when I started, but it was in January or February. We got going there, and they were so welcoming to me and our business. So, word of mouth, and then seeing them on Tuesdays, and just giving Betsy a call; just reaching out to her to see if this might be something they'd be interested in having at the market. They were looking for a meat vendor, so it just kind of worked out.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. Wow!

Reed Falkner: [laughs] Yeah, it was good. So, Betsy, I don't know if I can sing her praises enough. I tell her all the time, she has done a remarkable job at that market. I mean she has worked so hard just in the short time that I've been there. The years that I've been there, the change that has come due to her hard work—and others supporting, but led by her—has been... it's just eye-opening. I mean you can see it, you know? She just does, I mean, just a great job, seriously. Seriously.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That's great. What was that like, getting involved? Not just at the Oxford Community Market, but at the Midtown Market, what's it been like to be a part of the farmers markets?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, I mean, farmers markets, they're vital to us as vendors and the community as supplying valuable, nutritious food and allowing them to connect with local farmers just so they can, if it's not a Tuesday or a Saturday, then they know where they can go to

find some whole food. But the markets are great. Market days require prep. You have to you work around those. You pencil those in. Those are days that we'll be doing this or that. But then when you get there and you get to interact with the community and the customers, and build relationships with people, and let them know what you're doing, and, "Yes, we're raising our food the way we think it should be raised," and that's receptive.

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You know, just building relationships there, that's what it's all about. I mean, it's just connecting with your community and networking with them and just allowing them to know that this is available—and not just me, but other vendors as well—we have this available for you. Betsy and Miss Bost, they direct the markets and spearhead them and just give us an opportunity to be there. So, markets are vital, and you don't really think about it like that, I guess, until you're involved in them and you stay involved in them and you are loyal to them. Then you see you know how much traffic and how many people come by and how much of a necessity that they are.

Sarah Rodriguez: What does a typical market day look like for y'all?

Reed Falkner: On Tuesdays we will—so, we have a cooler trailer for our beef. Our beef is USDA inspected, so we cool our trailer down to about zero degrees. That'll start at 6:00 in the morning; we'll plug up just so we can get our cooler trailer cool enough to load it up.

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And then about 12:00, we'll run around the farm and do what we need to do on our rounds, and get back at the barn about 12:00, and start loading up beef, and then eggs, and our table, and kind

of get all our stuff together. Then we'll head up there about 2:15 - 2:30 to the market. We get there and we get set up. The market runs on Tuesdays from 3:00 to 6:30, and so we'll hang around there until we shut it down. Then we'll load it all up and come back, and then just have to unload all our beef and stuff that we took up there and unhook. That'll stop about 7:30 – 8:00 is when we'll get out of there, so it's about an eight-hour deal geared toward the market from 12:00 to 8:00, so they require some work and some planning. [laughs]

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Sarah Rodriguez: Especially since you've been gearing up since you took things over full time, what have been some of the unexpected challenges that have popped up in running the farm?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, when it comes to—you know, I'll start first with the chickens. When it comes to the chickens, you prepare for summers, you prepare for winters. I think maybe one of those winters, it was like ten days where it didn't get above freezing, so you have to work around Mother Nature which is always unpredictable. You actually have your labor out here that you have unexpected events on, whether it be that or just different predators or things like that. Then you have as far as marketing and your business, you've got unexpected dips and flows of vendors and needs and retail consumption and things like that that you have to work around.

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And then with the actual bird itself, you've got different stages of that bird's life that you have to work around. Like, it starts laying at six months. At about two-and-a-half years old, which is about thirty months, we're looking to move it off and you have to buy/bring in other birds.

There's a lot of different parts at play, and that's just with the chickens. As far as cattle go, just different hardships, you know? You're dealing with animals. You're trying to take care of animals, so you can have just different mishaps whether it be with calving, or whether it be they get out of the fence, or things like that. One of 'em might get sick one time. It's just different things that come with cattle. And right now the cattle market is *high*, unbelievably high. So, just trying to find new stock, or if you're looking to bring in some cash or things like that, if you're purchasing outside a farm, you have to now kind of budget in that cost for buying them.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Do you know why?

Reed Falkner: It went up after the pandemic, and then a lot of people with these markets being like they are—some people that have been in it for a long time—they'll try and sell out their heifers. They don't have much to replace it with, and then you got the droughts, and the heat, and then just different mishaps or accidents with some of these big livestock farms. People are trying to sell out of 'em. Feed's up. Cost of keeping these animals going's up, so the return might not be as much. So, you've got the drought, there's been a lot of different accidents. Like, there was a dairy-cattle farm accident, and I think it was I maybe like 18,000, something like that, where they lost them. But just different things like that, and then people with this market being so high it's a good time to sell out, and make some money on them, and when you do that you don't have heifers to breed back, so your stock goes down, so those just some factors that come in.

Sarah Rodriguez: Sure, thank you for sharing. Do we need to pause or anything?

Reed Falkner: No, I think we're good. That's Brandon. He runs Monday, Wednesday, Friday out there a little bit, so he feels good. I'm good.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Could you, maybe if there are any unexpected successes that you have over the past few years that you weren't anticipating...

Reed Falkner: Yeah, our eggs—our chickens have done extremely well, and the eggs have been extremely—the people have been extremely receptive of our eggs, and they wrote they really like the quality product we put out, so that's been fantastic. So, with that being said we were able to double at first, and from our start number we've tripled from that, and kind of got a great base for eggs, so that's been—

Sarah Rodriguez: About how many chickens do you have right now?

Reed Falkner: We have about 1,000 birds out there right now. We like to hang around 1,000 to 1,200.

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So, that's been unexpected, and then other things are, like, getting into these vendors, whether it be restaurants or grocery stores, and just seeing how these people, these business owners operate, and just kind of seeing what they have going on, and connecting and have relationships with them. That has been a lot of fun getting to go there, and on delivery routes, and seeing them, so that's been unexpected friendships at this point. And then with our cattle we've really turned around our pastures and improved our soil health which has kicked up much better forage for them to graze on, so we're getting better there. But this year we got back into cow-calf, I guess it

was last year, so we were coming back in our own stock, we rented for a while, and we sold out, but we're getting back into that and kind of having everything come through our farm from start to finish. We had twenty momma cows last year breed, and we had twenty healthy calves on the ground. Anytime during calving season, which is always difficult, if you can come out like that, which is almost a miracle 'cause something's usually bound to go wrong.

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But that was—I don't want to say just a success, but it was—but it was just something that was truly, truly gratifying to have that. So, that's cool and they're growing up, so we're excited about that. And I work with my dad, so that relationship, that's a lot of fun. I'm able to be here a lot. My baby girls come through here a lot; that's a lot of success, and that's kind of driving force behind this whole thing is to have them raised on this. So yeah, just the whole family and the business side of it comes with a lot of different ups *and* successes, downs and successes.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. That's special, though.

Reed Falkner: It's *so* special. Oh man, you can't put a value on it! You cannot do it, so we feel good about what we're doing, as far as a business, sure, but just as how we're upbringing and raising three little girls at this point.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. And what has it—you kind of have mentioned it a little bit, but could you kind of go more into what it's been like to connect with the community, particularly at the market? What has that been like? Any specific memories you may have?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, I mean, being from here, my mom, she grew up right down the road.

My dad was in Oxford. At that market, you get a good mix of bag of people coming through, so just over the years, you have people like, “Oh yeah, you're Lee's boy,” or, “Lee's your dad.” So, you get to see that generation come by and relive those memories with them about kind of, “I remember you when you were,” you know, “yay-high,” or whatnot. So, that's fun. The other is, getting to meet different vendors. That's been a pretty cool experience. Stark Aldridge always comes to mind at that market, so he's [laughs] been very welcoming. He sells eggs, I sell eggs, but in no way is it a competition. That's kind of what you're looking at: You can have this where we compete over things, but it's such a community-driven market where that's not even a thought. You know what I mean? So that's really cool.

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And then getting to know Betsy and the different customers that come by, they get to see, obviously your business, but it goes deeper to a family level, so people come by, and they see, your girls, and they already seeing how old they are, and that type of thing. And I have people come out and take tours from the market; they want to bring their kids out. Absolutely, so we get to ride around, and look at what we do, and just tell them about it. So yeah, that's kind of some things that come into mind. It's fun. The market's such a cool experience, and just not like a one-time thing. Once you stay there and you establish what you're doing, who you are, and this is your family, it really becomes a community.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm sure coming back every week kind of builds that rapport with everyone.

Reed Falkner: Right, right.

Sarah Rodriguez: You start seeing people every week, I'm sure.

Reed Falkner: Yes, and it gets into like, "I've seen you. What's your name?" And then you start, and there's a dialog.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's awesome. Very cool.

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What do you think—what do you see for the future of the farm, and maybe of your involvement with the market?

Reed Falkner: I don't think I'll ever want to leave the markets. I'm such a loyal dog in a sense of you remember your roots, you remember how you started out, you remember who was there when you started out and who supported you. And Betsy and that market have been there, so I don't think that's something we'll ever try to leave. So, I see that just being steady as we go which is a great thing, and then with the farm itself, we're just continuing to grow. We wanted to form an identity of who we were. It's easy once you get into farming to bite off more than you can chew or just get your head above the water, and that'll happen at times just 'cause. You know? But we wanted to—

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Sarah Rodriguez: Like, even without you doing anything?

Reed Falkner: Yeah. I mean, just stuff can occur that you just don't feel comfortable with, or this or that. You just have to learn as you go, but if you can plan it, and coordinate it, and put on paper a business plan or just how your steps look moving forward, and kind of stick to that as you go, you might sway one way or the other, but you still have kind of that ground to ride.

That's been instrumental in us forming that identity of—we want to be known for beef and eggs with regenerative agriculture, which is what we try to do here. You can get different species of animal. You can get too many in or not enough in, and just it might not work for what you're trying to do. But for us, with that mix right there, we're able to really hone in on that practice and just try to get really good at what we're trying to do. With that in that comes increased volume of livestock, which would be increased volume of beef going out, and just that sort of thing.

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So, our future: The eggs and the chickens. That was the primary focus for the first two years. That's about the number we're going to try to hang around unless we do something different as far as partnering, but for here on this farm that's it. The beef side is kind of where our focus is turned.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really?

Reed Falkner: Yep, it's turned there, and that's where we got our momma cows and bull, and that's why we're breeding in that way, so we're going to try to grow that in a pretty good amount, in that sense. That way if we have our X number of momma cows or whatever on this land, we'll funnel them right into our grazing system, or we'll have the option of pulling some back and go to momma cows. It just gives you different options there, but that's kind of where I focus is turned, is to the cattle.

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Sarah Rodriguez: About how many cows do you have right now?

Reed Falkner: Right now we've got just over 50 and looking to—we're in a breeding

season right now, so we'll kick some more calves out hopefully coming up at the start of next February, and kind of keep growing. We kind of got our eyes on 2025 is kind of our big cattle year coming up to see, you know, as they say, “Lord willing and the creek don't rise.” You know? But as far as our plans are going, that's kind of the direction and year we're looking at.

Sarah Rodriguez: And are you right now mostly serving vendors, markets, and stuff in the Oxford-ish area?

Reed Falkner: Yes, Oxford-ish area. Yep, that's kind of where we do most of our business, through restaurants and grocery stores. We reach out to Water Valley, which is still kind of close to Lafayette County, so yeah, that's pretty much where we do it.

Sarah Rodriguez: You mentioned regenerative agriculture...

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Could you explain more about your philosophy when it comes to running the chickens and the cows, and how you learn about new practices, and how do you kinda stay up to date with what's the best practice for y'all?

Reed Falkner: Yeah. I mean, that's the key: You have to find out what the best fit is for you. For us, what we try to do is we rotationally graze our cattle. We will move them into a fresh paddock every day, and in order to do that you had to have a baseline of grass, so that took some time just with healthy pasture management to establish that. We're there at that point. So, we move them around every day, and they'll start at X amount of forage height, and we only want it to get knocked down so much. That's really—that has been an instrumental part to success of improving our pastures.

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The other part is our chickens. We will bring them around behind the cattle; we try to time it about 10 to 14 days to be real specific. What that's doing is, the cattle—the cow patties, or their manure, start to cake over, and that's when you can kind of start to get flies in there embedded in, so the chickens come behind and help with fly control. They lay eggs obviously, and then also their manure on top of our pasture has been a huge fertilizer, just a natural resource, and it eliminates the cost there for manufactured fertilizer, and it helps with soil PH by just using those two animals to really impact the soil. So, with those two kind of working in harmony, there's a yin and a yang here with the ground and the livestock. I'm not gonna lose a cow or a chicken or any type of animal due to regenerative agricultural practices, okay?

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So, there's the animal welfare help [sp] that's here. Now, if I have to—which we haven't, knock on wood—but if you get a cow that gets sick or a calf that gets sick, we're gonna give that calf a shot of antibiotic or something like that, and then yes, we will probably have to sell it off. It won't go into our beef production plan.

Sarah Rodriguez: Because of the standards you've set up.

Reed Falkner: Yes, because of our ethical practices, that's right. That's right, but at the same time we owe a duty to that animal to do what we need to do for it to stay alive. Going back to the animal and soil, we're gonna give those cows and chickens enough to forage on, and at the same time having enough impact on our ground, so everybody will kind of move based on our observations of what we want here or what we don't want here. So, it all kind of works together,

and if you do that right or do it the best you can, what fits best for you, you'll have some pretty good success on the animal, land, and the soil side of it.

Sarah Rodriguez: What's your workforce like right now on the farm?

Reed Falkner: Let's see... There is me; I'm full time. My dad retired a couple years ago, so he's a pretty good helping hand, and I've got three other farm hands hired out. They come in, they work part time each day throughout the week.

0:36:10

Can I pause this real quick? Sorry about that. Let me see...

[Audio pauses and then resumes.]

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, of course. Not a problem. I guess we'll ask a couple more questions.

Your parents obviously were doing this as you were growing up. Did their parents also farm?

What's the lineage of it?

Reed Falkner: Yeah, so my dad, his parents did not. His parents didn't, but he before he went to college, a lot of his cousins and family, they were involved, and still are involved in row crops, or cattle, or baling hay, and stuff like that, so there's an agricultural background there. His mom and dad did not, but brothers and cousins and all them did.

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He was in Brownsville, Texas one summer with cotton and just being all involved in that, so he ended up further on down the road working Holstein cattle. This was in the '80s. He was running Holstein cattle, big old cattle, dairy cattle. He had a farm over there in Abbeville. I think he had, I

don't know, 300 head or something like that that they were running, and he'll tell you about the milk reduction that came in and cut milk in half, and kind of knocked him out of business, and that side of stuff. That's kind of his background. Since then, he's always had cattle ever along the way.

Sarah Rodriguez: Even if he's doing a different job.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, just doing something else different, he's always got 'em around. My mom, she grew up down here in Taylor, and her dad was more involved in, like, row crops and stuff like that, so just the agricultural background there too.

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But with them two—No, I mean, my dad just had that kind of around, and we were always around doing stuff on the weekends, and helping out throughout the week when something else wasn't going on. But naw, for the most part, it wasn't, like, passed down like generational. But at the same time, there was exposure, yeah.

Sarah Rodriguez: I imagine, just considering because I grew up in a rural place as well, you come across it regardless if your family's involved in it.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, that's right. We went down to—this might be too much, but we went to Fort Morgan early this year—I guess it was last month, Lord have mercy—for a family reunion on my dad's side, and they do that every so often. Anyway, we went down there, and we got caught up talking one night. I was talking with one of my cousins—first cousin—and he's about my dad's age. Him and my dad's brother, my uncle, were running around back in the day with agriculture, and, “I got a hay baler and I got it working and all,” and stuff like that.

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He told me stories like, “Yeah, I used to bale hay. I bought this hay baler from yada yada.

[laughs] I was king of the [0:39:09]. You know, I’d come in and do all this.” So, it’s cool to have that experience there, and be able to just hear what their—not war stories, but just their stories of running different equipment, and kind of how they had it back then, and how things were done, and to see where we are now, and how advanced it is. I went and saw another one of my cousins, and he lives around Como area in Mississippi, and they were baling hay one day, and I went out there, and I was riding around him and his son who’s a little older than I am. But his tractor had a cab and AC, and my cousin was asking me—he’s been doing it for about 30-plus years—he said, “What kind of tractor are you running?” I talked to him, and he says, “Is it an open station, or is it one of these closed cabs with AC?” I said, “Nah, it’s open station.” [laughs] He looked at his son and said, “See, that’s the way it ought to be! That’s how we used to do it back in the day!”

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So, you know, it’s in the family just along the trees of the branches. But you have stuff like that and it’s encouraging, and it’s also a good bonding moment, and you just kind of get to learn too.

Sarah Rodriguez: I’m sure it’s nice to have that kind of support.

Reed Falkner: Yeah. I mean, you get to learn from them, and have somebody to call when something goes sideways, and get an ear on some advice and stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: It sounds like that having that kind of community support in this type of work is really important.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, it’s huge. It is huge because you can’t do it by yourself. You cannot. I

mean, there's people around here in the community on different farms that I've talked with, and vice versa. It's just one of those, “If I can help you, I will” type things, which is, man, that's great to hear [laughs] and to know. It's a good support blanket, almost.

Sarah Rodriguez: Absolutely. As we're wrapping up, is there anything I didn't ask about that you want to talk about? Any stories that you thought of, anything at all?

0:40:59

Reed Falkner: No, I think that's pretty much it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Awesome.

Reed Falkner: Yeah, that's good.

Sarah Rodriguez: Great! Well, thank you!

Reed Falkner: You're welcome! You're welcome.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'll go ahead and turn off the recorder...

0:41:06

[End]