Steve Patterson
Rome, GA
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Date: October 18, 2018
Location: Rome, Georgia
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Shelley Chance, Pro Docs
Length: one hour and fifteen minutes
Project: Southern Sugars

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Annemarie Anderson: We're good. Today is October 18, 2018. I'm in Rome, Georgia with Mr. Steve Patterson. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder Mr. Patterson?

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Steve Patterson: Sure; I'm Steve Patterson. I make syrup here in Floyd County, Georgia. I've been doing so for about 30 years.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Can you give us your birth date for the record please?

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Steve Patterson: July 17, 1948.

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Annemarie Anderson: Great.

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Steve Patterson: So I've reached three score and ten this year.

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Annemarie Anderson: Great. Could you-- let's start off and could you talk a little bit about your early life, where were you born?

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Steve Patterson: I was born in Pickens County, Georgia, the county seat Jasper. My parents lived on a small family farm and up until I left for college that's where I lived.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So your dad was a farmer?

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Steve Patterson: Yes; he was raised on a farm that my great-granddad had acquired after the Civil War. And my dad in 1952 was able to buy his first farm in Gordon County, Georgia. And that's when we relocated.

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Annemarie Anderson: Cool; well could you tell me a little bit about that family farm then? You had mentioned that your-- what was it your great-grandfather?

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Steve Patterson: That's right. It's unique in that it's one of the few farms in North Georgia that raised tobacco. My great-grandfather I was told paid for that farm by raising tobacco and giving the person he bought it from 400-pounds of cured tobacco a year for some, two or three years and that's how he paid for it.

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It's small, hilly, nothing that you would think would be fit for agriculture but it served the purpose back then.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So that was his main cash crop?

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Steve Patterson: That was it; uh-hm.

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Annemarie Anderson: Did you--

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Steve Patterson: And he was an old-time Baptist preacher who had a circuit he traveled, so mainly the farm was just what they lived on.

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Annemarie Anderson: Cool. What was his name?

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Steve Patterson: Arthur Woodrow Patterson.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's a great name.

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Steve Patterson: Yes.

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Annemarie Anderson: So did you ever meet him?

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Steve Patterson: I did not; he died in 1929 I believe it was. And I was told he was a no-nonsense fellow which I guess if you lived in those times you had to be hard because times was hard. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: That's true. So did your grandfather also grow tobacco?

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Steve Patterson: He grew a tobacco, a plot about 20-foot square and he grew tobacco for his own use. So I was-- I do remember as a child seeing his tobacco patch.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's really cool. So I guess let's move up to your father. What was his-- your father's name?

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Steve Patterson: Lloyd Herman Patterson.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

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Steve Patterson: Yeah.

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Annemarie Anderson: And so when he started farming you mentioned that he moved-- that you guys moved. Could you talk a little bit about that community?

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Steve Patterson: Sure; dad was able to buy 120 acres and it was bordered on three sides by farms that were in the thousands of acres. So dad was friends with three big farmers because they all wanted his 120 acres. [Laughter] Excuse me; it was probably half of it was timber, which dad sold the trees and paid for the farm the first year we lived there.

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And other than we grew practically all of our food--practically all of our food. The cash crop was cotton. And we lived a mile from the cotton gin so it wasn't a big deal to get it there. By today's standards you would say that that's not very arable land but it served us very well.

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And we graded--when I said we raised all of our food that means meat, dairy, poultry, all the vegetables, grains, which was mainly corn for cornbread. And in time, dad sold part of it to build us a new house but-- and in time the boll weevil destroyed cotton and dad had to get a job in a textile mill but he always kept the farm. He always worked on the farm.

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And the day that he was putting air in his tractor tire and could not get up within a month he died. When he couldn't farm anymore he had no desire to live. I mean it's kind of sad but it's-- to me it's meaningful.

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Annemarie Anderson: Yeah; definitely. So what was it like as a boy growing up on a farm?

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Steve Patterson: Well I'll-- I'll give you my mother's comment and then I'll tell you mine. We lived in a house that had no electricity, no running water; it was literally a one-room log cabin in which two lean-to(s) had been built to and that was our home. I remember the day we moved there; no neighbors close. I was told when we auctioned the family farm off by a man that was a boy said that his dad said that poor old man that bought the old Strickland farm his family is going to starve to death, but we didn't.

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Mother says even though we had nothing, we worked all the time, those was the happiest days of her life. Those were the happiest days of my life. But most children are happy anyway because they don't have the responsibility of taking care of anything.

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Other than going to school, each of us had our chores. If you didn't do your job, it didn't get done. And consequently the family unit suffered, which means if you didn't get enough wood in to keep the fireplace burning then when everybody went to bed you got cold [Laughter] as an example.

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When I was six years old, I planted my first garden and I've had a garden every year since then with the exception of the time I was in college and the time I was in the Army. And I remember my mother and daddy laughing when they saw my garden, but later on, mother said she wished she had never laughed because right-- it was just very near the house-- when the corn and the beans and tomatoes all got ready she didn't have far to go to go get vegetables.

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I don't remember it being hard work. I don't remember it being monotonous. I enjoyed that type of life. I thought I would be a farmer. But I could not get back in to get the land when it come my time, so I lived off the memories until we moved here and was able to get a place to--.

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But truly happy days; I really think that it would help any child to be exposed to or grow up on a farm because you're so close to nature there.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And another question, so you've mentioned that your dad worked in a textile mill, too; can you talk a little bit about that? Do you remember where he worked?

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Steve Patterson: Well sure; he--he worked at a place called Velvetone Mills. And the interesting thing about Velvetone Mills is-- when the textile industry first come to this part of the country it started off in Georgia and they started by selling tufted spreads for beds and it was done as a cottage industry. And Velvetone Mills was one of the early companies to get started in this; the way it operated, a person who had a car who was called a hauler would go to the Velvetone Mills and get materials and go back out in rural areas and distribute them to families who would by hand tuft the spreads for the beds.

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And the designs, mother says the simple design that the children worked on they got a nickel for. But there was a very complicated one that's very popular and it was called the Peacock and they got like $5 for that, but only the adults did those. It is part of local color and local history from Dalton, Georgia to Cartersville, Georgia. And the 1950s-- it started before then but I remember the 1950s-- you could drive Highway 41 and about every two or three miles would be a building with clotheslines with tufted spreads hanging on them to catch the tourist traffic that was going from up north to Florida.

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Out of that grew the carpet industry. That's where dad went to work was building--working on--in a carpet mill. Actually, they made small rugs, something similar to this. And they were very, very thankful because they were able to feed their families. The boll weevil had done away with cotton growing.

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Annemarie Anderson: That sounds like it would be challenging for your dad.

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Steve Patterson: It was. It was. My dad like so many people and let's see, the reporter-- I believe it's Peter Jennings wrote the book *The Greatest Generation*-- it was, it was hard. I remember when we didn't have an automobile. I remember when what few things we had bought to eat was bought off the rolling store which is a truck that had a big bed on it and he would come by. You could trade butter and eggs and whatever and barter. It was a simple, simple life. I had no radio which is something that astounds me now in this day of social media and the internet and you know things instantly.

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My dad said when he was a boy, my grandfather--and the only news they got was the local newspaper--and my dad's uncle were talking and they told my dad and his brother, they said there's going to be a war and y'all will fight in it. They said--and they talked about Chamberlain and Wilson and all the world leaders, and I often wonder where they got their information. [Laughter] But and that's a long way from a challenging time for dad.

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My dad was a Baptist preacher. And I don't think he was ever broke but he told me he remembers the time that his dad was down to one penny. And he said I'm going to keep this penny; therefore, I'll never be broke. These are wonderful stories to me and this is part of my heritage because I come from a group of people whose motto seems to have been use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without which means the food was preserved, and if you look at the

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challenge on my dad, the challenge was a whole lot more demanding on my mother. She started--- excuse me; she had no older brothers and this is very touching to me. At 11 years old, she started plowing the mule because her dad had no boy to help him.

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Other than all the stuff that goes into taking care of a home without running water, without electricity, she went to the field every day, hoed cotton, pulled corn, picked cotton--whatever needed to be done, plus preserved all the food we ate. And as challenging as it was for daddy, the load seemed to be heavier on my mother, but she says that was the happiest days of her life, so--. And she don't want you to feel sorry for her and--and when she tells these things she smiles and laughs.

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Annemarie Anderson: Is she still alive?

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Steve Patterson: She is; she's 89.

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Annemarie Anderson: Wow.

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Steve Patterson: 89 years old. My dad lived to be 93. So maybe the neighbor who said that poor family is going to starve to death [Laughter] missed it altogether.

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Annemarie Anderson: What's your mother's name?

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Steve Patterson: Lilly Gay--Lilly Gay; her maiden name was Cordell and her grandfather, one of her grandfathers was an old-time Baptist preacher. Interesting thing, my grandchildren-- I believe I got this right-- can name five generations of their ancestors on their mother and my side of the family that all lived their life within 75 miles of where we're sitting.

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Annemarie Anderson: Wow.

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Steve Patterson: So we got roots. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: Definitely; that's great.

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Steve Patterson: Yeah.

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Annemarie Anderson: So well what kind of foods would your mother cook? What were kind of like the foods of your childhood?

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Steve Patterson: Okay; anything that was in the garden--it started off in the spring as soon as mother could start pulling cabbage leaves. There was green beans, which she would preserve in the form of pickle beans which is I think, a very southern delicacy, and the treat was she would put an ear of corn in there and pickle the corn, too.

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The full variety of a southern garden of tomatoes, she had a unique recipe for tomato soup and one for a vegetable soup that's very good. Pumpkins, you don't hear a bunch of them being grown. She made kraut. The-- at one time we grew celery and you wouldn't even think that was--. There was a company in Atlanta called Hastings Seed Company and in the Spring, they sent out the catalog. And mother and daddy would sit there and go through, and I guess they said well, let's try this and let's try this and then try this. And they would order the seed.

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Mother also baked. Not having any formal training, later on in life, my mother became the manager of the cafeteria at the local high school. And when there was a school function that required a banquet or anything, they requested my mother to cook--to prepare because over time she had evolved these recipes that she had got from-- some of them from her grandmother because her grandmother when she became so she couldn't take care of the house, my mother about the age of eight started cooking for them. So part of her recipes she learned from another generation before her.

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Kraut was a big thing; you know you--we--you tend to think maybe kraut is-- and maybe we did get the interest because part of my ancestry is German. Now, I don't know where kraut in Germany, come from Germany or not, but she prepared and preserved food traditionally. She dried some. She canned some. Our pork was salted. Our hams were sugar-cured. And I was trying to think of-- soup was a very key recipe. She gave the recipe to my wife who usually makes now about 25 gallons a year and she gives it to friends and one demand for her soup is people who are on chemotherapy says that's one of the few foods that they can taste, which is kind of strange.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's really interesting.

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Steve Patterson: Yes.

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Annemarie Anderson: So your mom was a really--she was an inventive and good cook?

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Steve Patterson: Oh yes; oh yes. Sewed our clothes. We were raised like maybe her grandparents were raised, and there is-- and she passed a lot of those skills and talents and traits to my sisters. You look at that generation, and I admire it as I get older, you might say that my

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mother was submissive, maybe if you wasn't around her all the time, but she just had a quiet way of seeing that the family's needs was met.

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One of her grandmothers was that herbalist who had learned remedies from the native peoples of this country, and as a child she would accompany her grandmother to collect such stuff as yellow root, black sage root, and certain barks, certain blossoms, and my great-grandmother would keep them on the-- hearth-- the mantle above the fireplace.

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And mother said woe unto you if you come in with any ailment because she would get up and she kept a little bottle of corn whiskey. She would pour a little whisky in the glass, go take a pinch out of this bottle, a pinch out of this bottle, mix it up and say here, drink this. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: So she grew up around people who knew how to use food as--medicinally as well?

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Steve Patterson: Oh yes. Oh yes; yes. And our fare was very simple. We usually had a meat; breakfast was your typical pork sausage. We didn't have bacon. It was streaky lean for breakfast. Biscuits, we did not grow wheat, so the flour was bought. But we were able to go to a mill that-- and get whole wheat flour. Mother preserved jellies, jams, the sweet part of breakfast. One of the-- one things that we--she did barter for was coffee off the roller store because her and dad drank coffee. And while we were eating breakfast, the other two meals of the day were being

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cooked. And we had no refrigerator but that didn't seem to bother her. She kept things; she would put it on the table and cover it with a tablecloth. Now-- now we're afraid to leave any food out.

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Was there something secret she did that she hadn't told us? I don't know. But the other things would be she would-- she was also a good pastry maker. One of the things you don't ever hear about; we grew rhubarb and mother made rhubarb pies, which were delicious to me. If you're not familiar with rhubarb, the taste of it is kind of tangy and you got sweet. But rhubarb is really a plant that grows in Michigan so how it got here-- maybe they ordered it from Sears-- from Hastings Seed Company and tried it. But I remember that.

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Annemarie Anderson: Where you grew up in North Georgia was that considered part of the Appalachians?

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Steve Patterson: It's interesting; the strip you're in right now, it is a strip of land that borders Appalachia and the old plantation South which is in this culture descended from Appalachia, but takes on a lot of values that come out of the big plantation. So in Calhoun, Georgia which is near where I grew up there was a place called Peters Plantation. It was on a big operation there. But in Pickens County you were right at the foot of Appalachia.

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In that area, the credentials you had to have was--whose boy are you? And if you give the right answer everything is good. But I have been asked that even going back up doing genealogy work and they said whose boy are you? I've been asked that question, and I thought it was neat. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: That's pretty great. So what-- so you mentioned you were in the Army too?

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Steve Patterson: Yes; yes.

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Annemarie Anderson: So after--

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Steve Patterson: Not by choice. I'm one of the-- I'm sorry; I interrupted.

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Annemarie Anderson: No; no, go ahead.

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Steve Patterson: I graduated from college on the 17th day of June-- no, no, on the 1st day of June and started working in corporate America on the 17th day of June and was sworn into the Army the 17th day of September. So I only worked three months before I was drafted. I served two years and then was-- got out.

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Annemarie Anderson: I see. Well, let me back up a little bit and ask you because you mentioned you wanted to farm but you weren't able to-- and then you went to college. What did you get a degree in?

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Steve Patterson: Civil engineering.

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Annemarie Anderson: Okay; so you worked as a civil engineer?

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Steve Patterson: Well, it’s interesting; after interviewing for jobs I wound up working for a telecommunications company. [Laughter] Designing their outside plant facilities which in time evolved to-- I became a financial manager where-- which is altogether different from farming where I was responsible for capital and expense budgets and people and all this other stuff. But a lot of skills I used were developed in my childhood back on the farm, particularly how to manage what you have to maximize.

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A story-- not a story; it was a documentary about treasure hunters that searched for sunken treasures in the ocean. And they were interviewing this guy who was going to recover some treasures from a ship and they asked him; they said what about your crew? And he said well, I've leased the ship and I've got this archaeologist and I've got this navigator and I've got these oceanographers and I got this one boy who is 25 years old that's never done anything but work on the farm. And the person in the documentary said why do you want a farmer? He said there's something unique about these people. When you're on a farm if something breaks you fix it with what you've got. You don't go get anything. He said when you're out in the middle of the ocean and something breaks you don't have any choice but fix it with what you got. He said only farm people can do that.

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I found it interesting and made me feel good. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: I bet. So did you move to Rome to work in that--?

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Steve Patterson: In telecommunications? That's where I started work and then I got back from the Army and I worked in Carrollton, Georgia. And which was the culture is about the same. Carroll County, Georgia growed the most bales of cotton of any county and state. I think they hold that record. Now Metro Atlanta is moving out on I-20 and farm has gone to that too and part

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of reorganization I wound up coming back to Rome in the early [19]80s. And we moved here and this is where our children grew up.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's nice.

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Steve Patterson: And this is home to them.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. So you moved here in the early '80s and maybe now we can start talking about your sorghum?

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Steve Patterson: Sure; sure.

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Annemarie Anderson: So how-- I guess let's get into this-- why did you decide to start growing sorghum?

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Steve Patterson: Living-- being raised where you-- there was no distraction and what I mean by that is the electronics that we have today and all the good they serve can be a distraction. And I

grew up in the time where the children sat on the edge of the porch in the summertime and listened to the old-- the old people tell tales, tell stories about their youth, about what they saw. I remember my grandmother telling about that her mother after the Civil War how hard it was to live here; that they had to keep all their food hid to keep from somebody stealing it.

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And they'd get talking about food and what they liked to eat back then and it was whatever they could get and how they fixed it and sorghum syrup would play into that. And I remember my dad telling of his youth; my grandfather was a syrup maker in the community. And dad would talk about that and it seemed to be something special to him. And I got thinking as I got a little older, how could something that tastes this good be made by what seemly was such a simple process and why wasn't anybody doing it? Why had it died?

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Now that I'm older it was because refined sugar had gotten so cheap people could afford it better. [Laughter] We would buy sorghum syrup; I guess we kept it--particularly in the winter months, even after Jean and I was married, we would buy sorghum syrup. And the interest was always in the back of my mind, always in the back of my mind. And I-- that's what triggered it.

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The way I got started, when we moved here a couple years later, I was able to go to my first real syrup making at Mr. Davis's, who had a mill that's about five miles from here as the crow flies. He was a nice old gentleman, quiet spoken, and at that time, he had made sorghum syrup for 65 consecutive years. And I come home that night and I said-- I had seen how it's done; I can do it. I'm going to get me a mill. That was my first experience.

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My wife, on the other hand, she grew up on a small farm just east of us and there was still an active cane mill in her community. Her family growed cane, so her comment to me was, you have no idea what you're trying to get into. I was-- I didn't let that daunt me; I went ahead and--.

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Our son Nathan and I in 1990 based on what the other people would tell us built our first syrup mill. And that fall cooked our first syrup. Now if Nathan was here, Nathan would recall that day and remember it as monkeys playing football. There was a lot of jumping up and down, a lot of noise, a lot of running around, massive confusion, many fumbles made, and at the end of the day we gained practically nothing. So that's the way he talks about our first syrup making experience.

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But the second year was a success judged by all the people who ate the syrup and I was hooked. I said I have found my calling. [Laughter]

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Annemarie Anderson: Well how did you remember the first time you guys cooked?

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Steve Patterson: Tense, aggravated, mad, wanted everybody to leave; when I put the syrup mill up, everybody who had eat sorghum syrup in the country decided to come and tell me how to do it. First off, we started to run the cane through the mill and broke the mill. So after an hour of fixing it then there was an argument of how the pan was setting amongst these old syrup makers, and they decided to take it all apart and change it the way they wanted it. Then there was

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somebody else that said well, you can't do it that way because you're right-handed and your pan is a left handed pan. You can never make it work.

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So being a man of just limitless patience and endurance I suffered through it and when the crowd started dying away then things started coming together. The biggest thing I remember was I hadn't any idea of what I was doing and had no earthly idea of what I was looking for. It's like the young man who informed his parents when he was going to college that he was going to study thermos bottles, which amazed his parents, and they asked him why thermos bottles? And he said a thermos bottle can keep cold food cold and the same thermos bottle can keep hot food hot. They said yes but why do you want to study it? And he said how does it know?

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So my question was how does this juice know when it is syrup? And then the second year it was almost like a light come on when I saw what happened. And then after that is, it's been a joy but the first year was very trying for me, yes, needless to say.

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Annemarie Anderson: Sounds like it. Well would you take me through the processes of learning how to make sorghum?

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Steve Patterson: Sure; sure. When--when we started, was before the days of internet. And the second year when we made a very-- the syrup had a light amber color, had a smooth taste, and I said, surely there's something written about this. So I was able to get publications from the

USDA, the Extension Service, and I started visiting other syrup makers and kept notes, I did, and it's just my nature of what was going on, if I did this what happened, and if I changed it what this? And every year since I've started I've made some changes to the operation trying to improve it to get better.

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So making sorghum syrup is not something you can teach someone. It's something you have to learn and it-- the learning as one old-timer told me, you got to boil a lot of juice to learn how to make syrup. And that I guess in essence is how--how you learn it.

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Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. I have a question, too, so I think it's interesting to me because like what the syrup looks like and what it tastes like varies depending on where the person is. Could you talk a little bit about like the ground you grow on and what kind of sorghum you grow?

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Steve Patterson: Sure; sure. First off the-- there is a definition for sorghum syrup. The FDA publishes it. And it's--the FDA says that sorghum syrup is a liquid food derived from the heat-treated concentrated juice of the sweet sorghum cane which contains no less than 74-percent soluble solids derived from said juice.

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A very clinical definition but in reality, sorghum syrup's taste can be smooth and mild, all the way to strong and sharp. Its color can be from a light amber to a dark blackish brown and

its consistency, viscosity I guess is a better word, can be from thin as dishwater to almost as thick as axle grease.

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For that reason, regardless of what you make there will be somebody that says that's just the way I like it. And if you ask people to give you a definition of sorghum syrup, they're going to define it in terms of how grandpa made it which fits in this big wide spectrum.

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Soil probably has as much to do with it as anything. Your sorghum syrup is made in the field. As a syrup-maker the best you can do is don't mess it up. The land that seems to be the best for syrup is a light gray, light colored sandy, well-drained ground because sweet sorghum is a heat resistant drought tolerant crop. And it's in the ground; it doesn't like to grow in marshy areas. That type of ground would give you a lot of color, milder syrup. Clay, which is predominant where I live, gives you a darker syrup with a somewhat stronger taste. Fertilizer, nitrogen particularly--if you put too much nitrogen, my experience is, your syrup will be very dark in color. The season has a lot to do with it.

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How you harvest it-- all this plays together. But the key thing I believe that probably has more effect than anything is the type soil, the type fertilizer and the conditions of the soil--basically the Ph level is what I'm looking for; yeah.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's great. What--what kind of varieties do you grow?

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Steve Patterson: We have grown mostly new varieties, Topper 766, M81E; we have grown an old standby, Orange. We have grown Honey Drip. We have grown Beat the Bee and that's just the ones that comes to mind. Beat the Bee, Honey Drip, and Orange are old varieties.

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Annemarie Anderson: I have a question about this because in doing a little bit of research just kind of like looking for heirloom varieties and I mean sorghum growers, it's kind of like this niche thing. How did you come by older varieties?

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Steve Patterson: Opportunity favors a prepared mind. I'm of the opinion being raised on a farm that if you want something and can wait and are patient you can get it give to you, so if you are looking for seed, you just let people know. And after a while somebody will say well my grandpa in his freezer has got some cane that he growed back in the [19]50s and he called it whatever. That's how I come up with some of them. An example is I met a man at the sorghum meeting and he said if you ever growed any Holland's Hoecake? And I said no. I'm going to bring you some seed. And it was a unique seed, which made a nice, somewhat strong and dark syrup. I mean, I messed up and the--the bag wasn't sealed tight and the freezer went dead and it got water in it and I lost the seed. But it's just asked--like Mr. Davis always planted Beat the Bee. A friend of mine that lives in middle Georgia, northern middle Georgia, whose family has been making syrup over 70 years, they have collected a lot of seed. And sometimes you find somebody like that you can get you a few--plant you a few and grow your crop.

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And by the way, all this new scientific stuff and that tends to be where we are now, backs up another statement I've made. There's no need--there are no new ideas. It's all been thought of before. What we've got to do is figure out what worked and resurrect them. For instance, I have found books that were published in the 1860s and [18]70s that outlines all the stuff we talk about now with making syrup. And you can read those books and learn all that but you still got to boil a lot of juice before you learn how to make syrup. [Laughter]

00:38:10

But to answer your question, soil, the environment, and--it's probably two key things that affects your quality or the type you make.

00:38:22

Annemarie Anderson: That's great.

00:38:23

Steve Patterson: By the way, on quality, I've never heard a syrup maker say they made bad syrup. There always becomes this wide definition I gave you of color and taste; they'll just say well I like it this way but it turned out this way. They will never say well I made bad syrup. [Laughter]

00:38:40

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I have a question and you kind of mentioned this with Mr. Davis and with Miss Jean's parents and your granddad, this idea of community mills. Could you

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talk a little bit about the community mill and what those folks have told you about what it was like?

00:39:01

Steve Patterson: You're getting to the true culture of sorghum in my opinion. Although, the product-- I like the taste of it and I enjoy making it, the true culture of sorghum syrup revolves around the people, how they made it, and how they eat--and how they used it. It is the people. The community mill, the actual mill that extracted juice probably was a pretty good investment back then. And consequently not everyone could have one. The way they processed it back then was labor intensive. When we started making syrup we modeled our operation out of--on one that was probably popular in the early--in the first half of the last century.

00:39:50

It took us two and a half man hours from the time we planted the seed until we put the lid on the jar to make a gallon of syrup. And consequently, you needed a lot of people. So the way that the community syrup mill worked was one person was able to get one. You'd get everything set up, develop the art; other people would plant cane. Their families would harvest it and bring it to the syrup maker. I'll speak specifically of what I have been told by my granddad's operation. They brought the cane; they brought the wood to cook it with and they brought the containers--the containers to put the syrup in. And he would process their syrup--he and his family, my dad and his brothers and sisters.

00:40:41

And his pay would be a toll and his toll was a third of the syrup. So the community, it turned into be a social thing which I think is why my parents' generation always enjoyed talking

about syrup making. It was a social thing. They got together; they was making the staple for their breakfast, which tasted good. They enjoyed it. But they got to interact. The children got to play. My granddad would put apples and the bark and cook apples and syrup for the children to eat.

00:41:23

And the average family might only grow the cane to make 10 gallon. The most I ever heard one man say that his dad wanted 50 gallons of syrup because they would eat 50 gallons of syrup in a year. But my dad remembers about 10 gallon-- is what he said. Grandpa, in order to pay for his syrup mill and what other things he had in the-- 1929, 1930s sold syrup for--3 gallon for $1, 3 gallon for $1. And the other-- Mr. Davis, I had the opportunity to talk to him; his operation was very similar to my granddad's. The most he ever made--Mr. Davis-- was made--was during World War II he made 1,000 gallons and that is using a mule to turn the mill and that is firing his furnace with wood. He made 1,000 gallons but he said those were about 16-hour days and lasted from early fall to on about wintertime.

00:42:37

Annemarie Anderson: That's a lot of labor. [Laughter]

00:42:39

Steve Patterson: That's a lot of labor.

00:42:40

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Annemarie Anderson: Wow; so knowing that about your granddad and your dad's experience, how did your dad react when you decided you wanted to start your sorghum mill? What was his--?

00:42:53

Steve Patterson: He was delighted. And he was a part of it and what he was doing was reliving his childhood and bringing back memories of the social aspect. One of the big tricks was amongst children was the way the syrup mills were built, they dug a hole to put the green skimmings in. At the end of the day, the children would build a booby trap and con other children into falling into that which was a sticky mess. They had to go to the creek to get washed off. He told that story over and over again.

00:43:30

Dad was-- let's see; dad died in-- 90--in 2013. For 22 years my dad was here every time we made syrup. The last year was he sit there, but he always wanted to be here. He said he liked the smell. And there was always somebody come by and sit down and they would just talk and talk and talk.

00:43:56

I go back to and it probably is the foundation of our syrup motto. I don't know whether you noticed it on the building or not. Did you notice it?

00:44:09

Annemarie Anderson: I did.

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00:44:09

Steve Patterson: The family that syrups together sticks together. Making syrup is a family operation; particularly the way it was made by the generation just before me. And dad-- dad enjoyed it. My mother mentioned the other night; she called and said, you made any syrup yet? And I said I made a little. Your daddy always looked forward to coming down there and being with you.

00:44:36

I am not being disrespectful; when your hair gets gray you tend to be able to say things with some immunity. I told a preacher, I said the responsibility of the elders in this day is to counsel and criticize and my dad tended to criticize a lot. You're cooking it too long. You're making it too thick. You're cooking it too thin. Your fire is too hot. Your fire is too cold. But out of that I was able to-- it helped me learn the process because he was recalling the way his daddy did it and that generation although I think the social is--a social aspect is why people talk about it, but that was a necessity because breakfast usually consisted of sorghum syrup, biscuits or cornbread, particularly in the late winter, early spring before the garden got growing, when they had eaten all the meat out of the smokehouse and that sort of thing.

00:45:44

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Did your mom enjoy coming and watching y'all make sorghum?

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Steve Patterson: Oh-- oh she always wanted to get involved. Being that my mother is-- was so focused on food preparation, she wanted to be sure that everything was clean and in order and straight and she got very involved. She'd come and helped us strip cane. She helped us cut cane when she was able. She was there when we cooked it, the whole nine yards; she tells of one of her granddads who always had a jar of syrup on the table.

00:46:22

And her--when my mother was born that granddad was already 65 years old which was unique for the time he lived in. He lived to be 96 when most people's average life span was about 70. And I told mother I said you reckon it's because you kept that jar of syrup sitting on the table? And she said well, I don't know about that.

00:46:46

Another story about people talking about syrup making; a friend of mine said that when he was a boy his mother--grandmother had passed away and he would go eat breakfast with his granddad. And his grandad had hired this lady to come in every morning, cook breakfast, and then she would cook as used to be the custom the other two meals for him while he was eating breakfast.

00:47:09

And he said my granddad always had sorghum syrup on the table for breakfast. And he said this woman made a biscuit that was at least as big around as a softball and he said he said, you had to open your mouth real wide to fit it in and said my dad--granddad would pour sorghum syrup on there and eat them and talk about how good it was. So he asked this lady one day, how did you learn to make such good biscuits? She said well, when me and my husband got married, we didn't have any place to live so we was going to live with his mother and daddy; and said, but

we left the preacher's house and started back over to their house and he stopped at the store and got a sack of flour. And when we got over to his mother's and daddy's house he said, now I want you to go in the kitchen and start making biscuits. And when they're done throw them out in the yard. And when the dog starts eating 'em call me.

00:48:03

So [*Laughs*]--so I guess her making biscuits was like me making syrup. You know, you just kept making it and after a while, somebody says it's good.

00:48:14

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Well could you maybe take us through-- this is one thing we haven't done yet-- could you take us through your process of how you make sorghum from getting it out of the field all the way up to it becoming--?

00:48:29

Steve Patterson: Until it's--

00:48:29

Annemarie Anderson: Syrup?

00:48:31

Steve Patterson: Until it's sitting on the table? Our operation as I said earlier was modeled after one from the early twentieth century. And as I did more research and visited more people it evolved. And we because initially would put two and half man hours per gallon, I wanted to

become more efficient. Now my workforce to begin with and I'm leading up to answer your question--

00:49:01

Annemarie Anderson: No; you're good.

00:49:04

Steve Patterson: --was family and friends and neighbors. So the first part was fairly easy. Sorghum was planted late spring and then by fall you harvest it when the sugar is reached. When it's reached or near its peak and one of the best ways to test that is by just chewing on it, but you--there are devices to measure the percentage of the sugar.

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We started off-- this required a lot of family help, stripping the leaves, cutting the top, cutting it with a machete, loading it on the trailer, and basically, we still remove the tops. We don't strip it anymore. We got a machine that cuts it. We pick it up and load it on the trailer. I think the climate is warmer; the growing season is warmer than it was. I have pulled numbers for the past 15 years that indicate that. That has an effect on how you cook syrup because when we first started harvesting, we would let it lay on the trailer in the shade for maybe three or four days before we would extract the juice. And it seems like it cooked real easy; it turned out to be very light in color.

00:50:21

If you do that now what I have found--what I have been--I've found, but I was told by the sugar-- what do they call? The sugar test center in New Orleans that with the acid in the juice

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and the heat you are inverting the sucrose sugar which you can't make thick syrup from. But we cut it now and take it right to the mill. We don't strip it. We extract the juice and we run it through a very fine screen. I believe that first screen has got 400 holes per square inch which catches dust that's accumulated on the plant and that sort of thing.

00:51:06

We either pre-heat the juice, adjust the Ph level using lime; we may use a chemical to help break down the starch-- amylase-- and that is a tablespoon per 100 gallon. We either pre-heat it; depending on the juice we might keep it cool, but we let it settle overnight. And that lets the big solids settle out because making syrup is like carving a statue. You take a block of marble and you do away with everything that's not what you want, so everything that's not syrup you get out of it.

00:51:50

So what we're trying to do is settle the--settle the juice out. We do use the traditional method; ours is the self-skimming pan. We no longer fire with wood. And we fire with propane now. The-- we cook it; we hand-skim it. When it reaches about 230--230 degrees it is syrup and you can tell that also by the way the bubbles are bubbling. We cool it to about 140 degrees, put it in jars, and ready to go.

00:52:30

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And you keep mentioning this is a family affair. Could you talk a little bit about the family that helps you?

00:52:38

Steve Patterson: Sure; sure. I have-- my wife Jean and I have been blessed by having two children, Nathan and Julie, who have never caused us one minute of worry or concern. I'm not saying we're not concerned with them and we don't worry about them. They have been--they have honored their mother and dad. And we have five grandchildren now.

00:53:03

The--Nathan and Julie all the way through high school, they were here; they were involved working. My mother and dad was here. My wife's mother and dad come and worked. My wife is from a typical old southern family. There was 15 children in that family. And two of them passed away very young; that leaves 13. At least 10 of them have-- were actively involved in helping us. My sisters and their husbands were actively involved.

00:53:38

So when we made syrup, everybody showed up. My mother, my sisters, my wife would spread a big dinner like church homecoming or a family reunion with all sorts of dishes that they specialized in. And therein lies our motto; *the family that syrups together sticks together.* That tended to strengthen the bond--people working together on--to reach a common goal.

00:54:17

As I changed the operation to become more efficient so I wouldn't have to have so much manpower, as our children grew up and moved out and had families of their own, I've realized what this efficiency had cost me. I was cooking syrup one day; I think three or four of my neighbors was helping me. And my son had gotten off of work early and he came by and he got busy doing something. And when all of the neighbors left he said, I still enjoy making syrup. It's so great and being with these friends was great. But since the family is not here, the love is gone.

00:55:01

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I've reflected on that a lot and the memories. Although, syrup is a commodity and we enjoy tasting it and that's what we want--want to do, as I've gotten older I think it's--life is about people and how we behave toward them and how we interact with them. I have been told if you want people to remember you after you're gone, you will spend time with them. And making syrup is a sweet way to spend time with people. [Laughter] So the family and this was--there was no expectations for pay; you know, they just wanted to be here and be involved in it, consequently I will say when we make syrup, although I put up all the money to get the operation going, it was a family operation. And it grew to-- the neighbors found out about it and they started planting cane. They got involved. It was all good.

00:56:08

But the efficiency and-- and that's life. You know, I expected my children to grow up and you know. But now that we have grandchildren my cooking crew this year is my five grandchildren ranging from age seven to seventeen. They each have a job. They will overlap and help each other and they seem to enjoy it. They really seem to enjoy it.

00:56:40

If you want people to remember you, you spend time with them, and what better way to spend time than the sweet way of making sorghum syrup?

00:56:52

I have been fortunate to be-- I'm not saying I'm unique, I'm not saying I'm special; I'm just acknowledging I have been blessed to be in the family that I am in. we have our problems. You know, each of us act unruly. Each of us disappoints the other. We say things that hurt each other's feelings. That's life. But at the end of the day, there's a sense of forgiveness and we go forward.

00:57:23

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. How do your grandchildren like making sorghum?

00:57:25

Steve Patterson: They enjoy it; they enjoy it. They're to the point now that they are starting to criticize and counsel me on how to make syrup. Grandpa, I think that's just about ready. Now grandpa, I'm going to get the refractometer and I'm going to read the brix on this syrup. Grandpa that's only 73 and you know what the rule says, it's got to be 74. And they-- here again, three of them live in Alabama and two of them live here, so they're able to interact. And the fact that they're active, people will stop by and talk to them, they enjoy that social part of it.

00:58:08

The oldest has got a car now, and you know this may be the last year. She will be graduating I guess next year and heading off to college. It is a-- sorghum syrup is a unique thing. My son at Southern Tech studied mechanical engineering--designed a cane-mill as a project. My daughter at Mercer University had to give a speech on a process. She talked about making sorghum syrup. My grandson next door had-- he is 13; when he was 11 he had to give a-- with 4-H he made a presentation on making sorghum syrup. There's somebody else in the family; it is--that is--I done forgot who it was--that's made presentations or made a talk on making sorghum syrup. And it's a way of life that is no longer here.

00:59:19

Five miles up here was Mr. Davis' mill. Three miles over here the Watters had a mill. Six miles over there the Gilbreaths had a mill. The Sanders family had the mill up here. All that

dated in the last century and they're all gone. And what I'm finding now is very few people know what this food is. Very few people know what the versatility of this food is. And I think that's what my grandchildren like about it 'cause they don't mind experimenting. For instance, we had chili. Grandpa, have you ever just put some sorghum syrup in chili? It makes the taste more complex. Or Grandpa, that vegetable soup that Grandma makes that we really like, I put some sorghum syrup in it. Grandpa, here, try this.

01:00:11

So I think making it and they have been involved in all facets from plowing the ground in the spring to experimenting with it on what we eat. They have been involved in all facets. And whether they will ever have a need to do this or not, I don't know but at least they got the memory.

01:00:34

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. You mentioned all these mills that were around and you're kind of the only one left. This question is I guess a little bit-- a two-part question; what does your mill and your operation mean to this community or this area as a whole, and what are you trying to do-- or are you trying to do anything to educate other people who might not know anything about sorghum?

01:00:58

Steve Patterson: Occasionally, a civic organization, school, will you come and tell us about sorghum syrup? Of course, I'm willing--willing to go and as Jean said, I do like to talk. I have had and here again it was my daddy and mother's generation bringing their great-grandchildren

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here to show them and talk to them about their memories. So what I'm doing for the community is exposed. Driving down the road, you can see us--we have a lot of people just stop by. And as I've said, we're a small producer. I almost say that we're I don't mean to sound uppity but we almost use an artisan's approach in that we're constantly checking quality. We're--and monitoring and we'll make--make small batches is what we do.

01:02:07

Family, people at work gets it, and we have a small local market. One thing that we've done that's been used a lot is we have made a little video that we've published on YouTube that one store that carries our syrup set up a monitor behind the syrup display and looped that video so that people could see it. The newspaper, they come out; as a matter of fact, the newspaper wants to come out tomorrow and interview the children. And, but my parents' generation is practically gone or not physically able to come anymore. So a few of people my age still remember it. They're bringing their grandchildren. But to answer your question, there's not that much demand unless somebody stops by and tastes it, which happened this year.

01:03:08

A gentleman stopped by and had a young lady with him, a young lady, she probably was in her twenties, and her mother was with them. And her mother had heard of it, and I--something I said to them; I said taste it. And she was amazed at the flavor. And she used all these big words about I think I heard her say complexity and the consistency and the way it flowed and consequently she bought some to take with her. But it-- my parents, my dad and now my mother, apologized to me that they did not preserve more of their youth than they did-- the fact that I have an interest. And there's always a few people that have that interest, so what I'm trying to do for the community is for those few people, come and help us. Come and make syrup. If you're

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young, you can put it on your resume when you apply for a job that you are a journeyman syrup maker.

01:04:24

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. I have only a couple more questions for you.

01:04:28

Steve Patterson: Sure.

01:04:29

Annemarie Anderson: And we kind of talked about this, too; I'm a little jumping around a little bit, but we were talking about kind of--and you were talking about this idea, the efficiency and trying to make it a little easier. What--what type of ways have you I guess machinery-wise what's been the evolution of your machinery? What--what do you use?

01:04:50

Steve Patterson: Sure; okay. We'll talk about the furnace. The first furnace I made it was wood-fired which means in March we cut pine wood and split it and cured it so we'd have a nice hot fire. Found out if we used propane, we didn't have to do that. I don't know a whole lot about propane. I remember a story about a guy that was jumping out of an airplane and his parachute wouldn't open and as he's falling through the air wondering what was going to happen, he sees a speck coming up from the ground at him and as he gets closer he realizes it's a person coming up.

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And when they got close he hollered hey fellow; do you know anything about parachutes? And the guy coming up says no; do you know anything about propane stoves? So I went out, and not knowing anything about propane-- and made a burner. And we ate supper and it got dark and Jean said why are you going back outside? And I said I've got this burner set up out here in the field and I'm going to light it. She said I'm leaving. [Laughter]

01:05:52

But using propane instead of wood, having a stainless-steel container so we can keep juice, store juice overnight either by cooling or by preheating it, we have tried stainless steel pans. We've tried to simplify what we're using. What I mean by that is, our first few years, the cleanup was the worst thing because we had everything dirty. Now we're trying to simplify it. You know you don't have to use all these containers and all this stuff. And the folks that have seen this operation or remembers them from the last century says this don't look at all like a syrup mill.

01:06:39

So hopefully we haven't evolved too far.

01:06:43

Annemarie Anderson: I don't think so. Well, I have one more question for you and then I'm going to open it up for whatever else you want to say.

01:06:51

Steve Patterson: Okay.

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01:06:52

Annemarie Anderson: And that would be-- why is it important that sorghum syrup making continues? Why is it important and why do you do it?

01:07:00

Steve Patterson: I have learned that it is a very versatile food that complements any dish and any meal from the appetizer through dessert that you can also use to sweeten beverages. You can use it in mixed drinks. There's a drink called the General Patton that has sorghum syrup in it. I think importance is the health benefit--is why we should keep it up and why it needs more education. Sorghum syrup is not just sweet; it's not just sugar. It is a good source of iron, trace minerals of copper, magnesium, metals; it has calcium, a good source of calcium, good source of Vitamin B-2, protein. You do not get this in other sugars. That's why I think this is so important that we try to educate people and there is an effort.

01:08:12

A reality show that was on TV, the *Biggest Loser*, I forget; there was a dietician who said that ounce per ounce sorghum syrup had more antioxidants than any food tested besides pomegranate. And that it was four times more antioxidant than the darkest honey. The people that I know that realize these things expounds the health benefits of using it. I think that's important.

01:08:45

I also think it's important that we--somebody keep this culture alive. It comes from a group of self-reliant people. And there's a lot of stories. Sorghum syrup is a relatively new thing

in this country. It dates back to 1850. The Civil War probably had more to do with the sorghum syrup becoming popular than anything. The North is the reason why it's so big; they wanted to free their northern states from depending on southern sugar and molasses prior to the Civil War.
01:09:27

Then after the Civil War it found a home--Appalachia, the Ozarks, in the southeast--that's where it's predominantly now. Health benefits; it's part of our culture, it is part of our history--I think that's why we should keep making it.

01:09:46

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about?

01:09:51

Steve Patterson: We haven't talked about eating it, tasting any yet. I think that pretty well covers it. The-- I was running down the checklist. One thing that a couple of years ago and I will share this with you; about 2015 is when the sugarcane aphid crawls from sugarcane to sorghum and practically all of the sorghum makers lost their crop this year and said what has happened?
01:10:21

So we found the remedy for that and then I noticed all of the sudden and this is the question we haven't answered, when I first started making syrup you cooked it 228 degrees; you had a good product. Now it's 230-- 233; none of us can figure out why. But I noticed in 2016 we could not get the syrup thick. It was thin as water. So I set out and changed to a whole different approach towards sorghum syrup. I started trying to figure out why it was doing that.

01:11:00

I did a lot of research; took samples of juice, samples of syrup, sent them to the University of Georgia and had HPLC, high performance liquid chromatography testing done which will give you a graph of the sugars. And what we found was that our old process of letting it lay was the reason why we were not getting it thick. What I'm trying to see now is--is there really an influence of warmer growing seasons compared to when we first started.

01:11:43

When we first made syrup you had to push people away from the furnace because everybody would want to get around it to get warm. And now we got fans running and trying to get the heat out of the building because it's so hot.

01:11:55

I truly enjoy it; I am truly enjoying it with my grandchildren. I truly-- just the wonder, just to watch them interact, and we have met a lot of people and made a lot of lasting-- long-lasting friends, particularly after we joined the National Sweet Sorghum Producer and Processor Association. This week I've talked to a girl from Wisconsin. I've talked to them in Tennessee, Mississippi, the--. Now in North Georgia, sorghum only growed north of the fall line in Georgia; the fall line if I understand it is about where the ocean used to come to years ago. Below that the weather was too hot. They grew rummy cane and sugarcane and made syrup from it.

01:12:54

North of the fall line I named the--the growers who was here, every community along--through North Georgia had a syrup maker. A friend of mine from Young Harris, he and I were talking the other day. We can only name five people that's doing it in North Georgia now. And if we don't do something to increase the market it's not going to be economically feasible. But I

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don't make any money at this anyway. I keep saying if I wanted to make money, I'd go get a job. You know I do this because I enjoy it. And that is true of a lot of them; some of them are third generation people now. But it's--it's always nice to talk about sorghum; it sure is.

01:13:43

Annemarie Anderson: Okay; I have one last question.

01:13:45

Steve Patterson: Sure.

01:13:45

Annemarie Anderson: And that would be to describe how sorghum tastes to you.

01:13:50

Steve Patterson: Ah I will quote Mr. Jim Behar, the Executive Secretary of the NSSPPA who says it can be as smooth and soft as a feather floating down your throat with such complex flavors that are just interacting and it's just making your tongue dance. Or, it can be like someone taking a drag harrow and dragging it across your tongue and just tearing it up and set you on fire. To me, sorghum is a very complex taste. It's sweet but it has what we characterize as a sorghum taste which is various-- it can be stronger depending on the variety and the ground and it is I think it's that taste that makes it complement so many dishes. So to answer your question, the only thing I can say about the taste of sorghum is, it tastes good.

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01:14:56

Annemarie Anderson: Great; is there anything else you want to say?

01:15:00

Steve Patterson: I can't think of anything.

01:15:04

Annemarie Anderson: Okay; well thank you so much.

01:15:05

Steve Patterson: You’re welcome. This has been a pleasure.

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