



Terry Hughes
Olin Hughes Sorghum Mill

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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
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Project: Southern Sugars

[00:00:01.12]

Annemarie A.: Ready?

[00:00:01.25]

Terry H.: Any time.

[00:00:02.12]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Today is November 2, 2018. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am in Young Harris, Georgia, at the Olin Mills—Olin Mills, oh, my goodness.

[00:00:15.25]

Terry H.: That's the picture taker. [Laughter]

[00:00:16.29]

Annemarie A.: I know. [Laughter]

[00:00:22.14]

Terry H.: Olin Hughes.

[00:00:22.14]

Annemarie A.: I keep wantin' to do that. Olin Hughes Sorghum Mill with Mr. Terry Hughes.

And today, I've already said the date, where it's about eight o'clock in the morning.

[Laughter] So. We'll get started. Could you introduce yourself for the recorder, please?

[00:00:42.25]

Terry H.: Okay. I'm Terry Hughes.

[00:00:44.10]

Annemarie A.: Great. And what's your birth date?

[00:00:45.25]

Terry H.: 12-22-[19]55.

[00:00:49.17]

Annemarie A.: Great. Let's start a little bit and talk about growing up here in Young Harris. For people who haven't ever been here, could you describe it?

[00:01:00.10]

Terry H.: Young Harris, just a small town, mostly a college town. Located in the mountains.

Basically in the little Young Harris Valley, which is at the foot of Brasstown Bald, which is the highest point in Georgia. Just a little valley. And neighbor cities would be

Blairsville to the west and Hiawassee to the east.

[00:01:28.15]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And what was it like growin' up here?

[00:01:30.16]

Terry H.: Well, years ago, it was good. It was really in the country then. Wasn't what many people living here. 'Course, since there, they've been a lot of development and houses and a lot of people moving in, retiring, and stuff. But it's still a nice place to live.

[00:01:51.23]

Annemarie A.: That's great, that's great. And you were tellin' me a little bit before we started recording, about your dad. Could you tell me, I guess let's talk about your family background. What did your mom and dad do?

[00:02:08.25]

Terry H.: Basically, they farmed their entire lives, they did. Both of 'em did, and Mama was, we'll say a homemaker. But she helped out a lot on the farm, too.

[00:02:18.26]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What did they farm?

[00:02:22.08]

Terry H.: Started out anything they could make a living at. [Laughter] Or put food on the table. But over the years, he's had a small-scale hog operation, had some cattle. Eventually he

got up to maybe a hundred head of cattle. Was in the poultry business. Grew a little corn and stuff like that. But, as far as a crop that he grew over the years, sorghum was the main one.

[00:03:00.03]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And what about the rest of the community? Was it mainly an agricultural community?

[00:03:08.12]

Terry H.: It was. A lot of people, they did farm. Everything would be small-scale. There's no big vast, flat acreage up in the mountains. So, a ten-acre field is a pretty, pretty hard to find, ten-, twenty-acre field around here. There is some, but not many. But they would farm, and a lot of that was to make a little money. And a lot of it would be just sort of like a big garden for them and their family. Then they were some factories started creeping in, in the [19]60s, and those same people would maybe get a job at the factory, and they would work there. They would still do a little bit of farming. But the factories provided a steady income, year-round, where the farming did not.

[00:04:06.16]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense. What kind of factories were they?

[00:04:09.01]

Terry H.: They was a Georgia Boot out here at Blairsville. That was one of the first factories. I don't know how many they would employ, probably . . . I guess at one time, to count all shifts, they actually run three shifts—I'd say they probably three or four hundred people, or maybe even five hundred people there. That was the main one, back in the [19]60s. A lot of people worked there.

[00:04:34.03]

Annemarie A.: Is it still around today?

[00:04:37.08]

Terry H.: The building is, but as far as the Georgia Boot is still in business, but a lot of their stuff is made overseas now. I think, even back then, their base was Franklin, Tennessee. That's possibly still where their base is at. But most all boots, if not all of 'em, are made overseas.

[00:05:01.16]

Annemarie A.: Interesting. So, you were talkin' a little bit about your family's history with sorghum, and you mentioned that your dad started growing in 1946. Could you talk a little bit about how he got started in growing sorghum?

[00:05:23.12]

Terry H.: He started, him and Mother hadn't been married very long anyway. He basically started growing sorghum just to make a little syrup for their own use and maybe for

brother and sister's family's use, you know. But he started that in [19]46, and he continued that on up till 1954. He decided he could make a little money at it. So, he actually set up his own processing, his own mill, to where he could process the cane, make it into sorghum syrup. So, he had his own label then in [19]54. It went on quite a few years, still somewhat small. He might not would make over maybe a thousand gallon up until the [19]60s. And that was at Blairsville when he first started, and then he moved to Young Harris, and the first year he cooked syrup here was in 1959. Then, once he started that, he had a lot of people that wanted to grow sorghum, basically as a money-maker. So, he started processing for the public, and it just spread like wildfire, basically. It got to where Dad would have to book days, cooking days, and in August, people would have to get their cooking days down because it was just six days a week, two pans a-going, and basically the months of September and October were booked solid. They would make maybe eight, ten, twelve-thousand gallon of syrup each year. That held through the [19]60s and [19]70s and up to about the mid-[19]80s before the decline started.

[00:07:30.18]

Annemarie A.: That's really interesting. Can you talk a little bit about what was—so, I know sorghum was a really labor-intensive crop. But, for you as a young boy and your kind of family dynamic, how did the two-pan system work, and how did y'all kind of do that?

[00:07:54.14]

Terry H.: The two-pan system? Well, Dad would cook on one pan and the other pan, which is totally separate as far as the holding tanks for the juice and stuff, and my mother would cook on that. Dad would have those people that he would cook for. He could be cooking for the family, in other words, me, my brother, or my sister, off of their crop. But, if it was a—we'll call 'em grower—well, then Dad could be cooking on one person's and Mother could be cooking on somebody else's. 'Course, the syrup was all kept separate, and Dad and Mother, they would get a toll, they would get a percentage, of that syrup instead of payment like in cash. Usually, that toll was a fourth. He would take in the—you know, if it made a pretty good quality syrup and those people that grew the sorghum, if they were wanting to sell their part to Dad, well, he would maybe buy their part, too, in other words. If not, if they wanted to take their syrup and try to sell it theirself, well, I mean, they could; it was theirs. But a lot of times, he would buy their three-fourths, too, because he needed it because he had a very, very large market at the time.

[00:09:27.17]

Annemarie A.: I want to ask you about that, too. So, what was his market? Who did he sell to?

[00:09:35.22]

Terry H.: He would sell, they would be people that Dad called 'em peddlers. [Laughter] But they came from maybe three hundred miles or more from here, and they would take, during the year, once they'd got started, they would take orders basically from their area. And these peddlers would—they might get up a order, big enough order, say for a large pickup load of syrup. And they basically knowed they had all this syrup sold. So, they

would come to here, they would contact Dad, and they would come to here. And I can remember as a kid just pickup load, it was just every day there'd be maybe a pickup load of syrup leaving here. That's how the syrup, since Dad did no delivery, that's how the syrup got spread out. Is from those peddlers. And they, naturally, they would take, and they was doing it for a profit, too, so they would buy the syrup and they would take it back to their area and get it distributed out to all the people that wanted it. You know?

[00:10:50.14]

Annemarie A.: Do you know some of the specific areas that they would come from?

[00:10:53.15]

Terry H.: Gosh. It could . . . they was quite a few places, as far as North Carolina. Out past Charlotte. And a lot into Tennessee, in the Knoxville area, Chattanooga area, over into the Birmingham, Alabama area. And not a whole lot South, but-- maybe none in Florida. But mostly Georgia. Let's just say north of Macon, whatever, most of those places would be. Maybe a couple of hundred mile or more out.

[00:11:35.06]

Annemarie A.: That's super interesting. So, do you know if they came from—'cause you're mentioning these big, kind of region cities, did they come from these cities and they're fillin' orders for people who live in these urban areas?

[00:11:49.26]

Terry H.: No, most of them, I would say, would be from urban areas. And they would just take it. It would be just like here, you know? Once they got it started-- the trouble was getting it started, and then basically the people from their area would call and come to them, say, "Hey, when you go get syrup, how about picking me up so much?" And they would keep those orders written down. Then, when it comes syrup-making time here, they would come and pick all that syrup up. I still have one today that still does that. He's about two hours east of Charlotte.

[00:12:25.01]

Annemarie A.: Oh, wow. That's kind of a far drive.

[00:12:29.27]

Terry H.: And he's about the only one left out of that bunch. And they've been coming for over forty years.

[00:12:37.17]

Annemarie A.: Wow. That's great. So, when you were a kid, what was your role in this operation, if you had one?

[00:12:47.16]

Terry H.: When I was a kid, basically it was, if it's after I started to school, it was all my friends at school and stuff would be talkin' about, "Are you gonna go to the syrup mill this evening?" And we'd all gather up and have a big playtime on the cane pummies and stuff.

It was a good, good place to play. There was a lot of people running around, because there's so many people, moms and dads that would grow the sorghum. They would be here, maybe, anyway. So, it was just every day, it would be a different group of kids or friends, whatever that I would have to play with. You know? 'Course, as I got older, the playin' stopped. [Laughter] And more working got involved in it.

[00:13:35.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, back then in maybe the late 1950s, the 1960s, early 1970s, what—how did your dad kind of harvest and process the cane? What was that like?

[00:13:54.21]

Terry H.: It was all, as far as what he growed or what we growed as a family, it was all hand-harvested, hand-stripped, hand-cut. The seed heads cut off by hand. Loaded by hand, unloaded here at the mill site by hand. Another person picks it up, puts it in the mill. I used to get a lot of people—it's a thousand wonders it wasn't wore out by the time you got it here, as many times as it was handled. You know? But just everything was by hand. Basically, we still do—other than the head-cutting—we do all that still by hand.

[00:14:38.15]

Annemarie A.: Wow. That's a lot of labor. So, you were talking a little bit, too, about the public cookings. What did this mill, and what did your dad, your family, mean to the community?

[00:14:57.25]

Terry H.: Well, as far as what it meant, I'm sure by providing a service that it meant that a lot of people could pick up a little extra money during the year. Besides their regular job being at a factory or whatever. In other words, it was just another way for people to make a little extra money.

[00:15:23.16]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do you want to—is there anything else you want to talk about your family or about growing up?

[00:15:31.12]

Terry H.: Ah . . . nothing other than I really enjoyed it. It was a good way of life.

[00:15:37.28]

Annemarie A.: That's good. One clarifying question, what's your mother's name?

[00:15:42.06]

Terry H.: Lois.

[00:15:43.10]

Annemarie A.: Lois. Okay. Lois Harris— Lois Hughes. So sorry, I know your name. [Laughter]

I know your name.

[00:15:55.09]

Terry H.: She was a Bridges, was her maiden name, okay? I have syrup makers on the Bridges side and the Hughes. My mother's brother was in the syrup-making business. And that's actually before Dad got into the processing part, when he was just growing the sorghum, my mother's brother actually would, for a few years, cooked his syrup for him, cooked that syrup for him.

[00:16:30.27]

Annemarie A.: Okay. So, I have another actually kind of question. So, you were talking about your grandparents. Did your granddad or your grandmother's family or her, did they have a history of growing sorghum and cooking as well?

[00:16:44.03]

Terry H.: On the—

[00:16:46.20]

Annemarie A.: On your father's side?

[00:16:46.20]

Terry H.: On the Hughes side, no, no.

[00:16:49.08]

Annemarie A.: Okay.

[00:16:50.13]

Terry H.: It was—

[00:16:51.19]

Annemarie A.: Just the Bridges.

[00:16:53.23]

Terry H.: On the Bridges side, yes. Mother's. And my uncle, in other words. But two on the Hughes side, after Dad started in [19]54 on the processing part, when his brother, Talmadge, got out of the military—during the Korean War. Well, he helped dad at the mill during the fall. He possibly fed the cane into the mill that squeezed the juice out. Then, sometime in the [19]60s, he—Talmadge decided he wanted to get into the sorghum-making business. So, they lived north of Blairsville on what's called Gumlog. Anyway, they set up a pan and it started out just like here, a single pan. Then eventually, it grew into two pans, and Talmadge and another brother of mine-- a brother of Dad's, I'm sorry-- Worth, he would cook, Talmadge and Worth, one on each pan over on Gumlog. They made syrup for . . . I'm just gonna guess, maybe for twenty years, whatever, and then 'course, Talmadge, he passed away from cancer. His daughter and son took it over. I don't know, they made syrup for just guessing, maybe four or five years, whatever. Then, eventually, they got out of it. They did. And they both have since passed away.

[00:18:36.25]

Annemarie A.: Sorry to hear that. Maybe we can talk a little bit about your decision to get into sorghum. You have a pretty big family history of people planting and harvesting and producing sorghum syrup. Why'd you decide, as an adult, to start doing this?

[00:18:58.01]

Terry H.: Well, I had took—and I've basically, ever since I can remember, I've had a small crop of sorghum. [Laughter] And even though I might of thought that I'd harvest it all, myself, I've had a lot of help doing it. In other words, a lot of grown-ups would help me, just a small, maybe a quarter acre or something. But I tried on up in my teenage years, well, then I started plantin' a little more. And when I was in high school, I took my senior year, I started mechanicing out at a place in Blairsville. I done that till 1981. I was still growing a little sorghum, and I decided that I wanted to farm full-time. And basically, I've done that since 1981, farmed full-time. I did that, and Mother and Dad—and of course, my sister and brother, and they had sorghum, too. And growed it. But Mom and Dad would do the processing for us. In [19]98, Dad decided that he did not want to be in the business no more, so he wanted to ask me if I would take over the syrup-making part. So, I did in [19]98. I still continue to grow, and sorghum, and my brother and sister, they did too, up to about—I guess about 2005. 'Course, we all were getting older. They decided that they had pretty well done it about all they wanted, so both brother and sister, them and their families, got out of the sorghum-growing business somewhere around 2005. It's just been—when the quit, well, then I increased my acreage to get up

somewhere around the thirty-acre mark, trying to produce about what gallons of syrup that I needed.

[00:21:13.23]

Annemarie A.: That's quite a bit of sorghum.

[00:21:17.01]

Terry H.: Well, it is. And always, you need to plant more than what you actually need, because there's so much stuff can happen to it: wind damage and this and that. So, even if I had forty acres, that way I could pick and choose maybe on the better fields or whatever. Even though I might just harvest thirty. But if you need twenty-five or thirty acres or sorghum, and you only plant twenty-five or thirty, and you harvest all of it, then you don't have anything to pick or choose from. You've got to harvest all of it. So. And it's not a very expensive crop to plant, compared to a lot of stuff like corn and stuff. It doesn't require a lot of fertilizer. Your seeds are relatively cheap. If you buy your seed, if not, you can save your seed. But if you buy your seed, it doesn't cost much per acre. So, really, plant more than you need. Other than a little bit of cost, it's not a bad thing; it's a good thing, really.

[00:22:31.04]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And that's one thing I wanted to ask you about, because talking to different producers, it seems there are lots of different varieties of sorghum.

[00:22:42.21]

Terry H.: There is.

[00:22:42.21]

Annemarie A.: What kind do you use?

[00:22:44.29]

Terry H.: I basically like—and we, as a family, Dad was the same way—like any of the old varieties. It's not that they're the most disease-resistant or they're the best about lodging, which is falling down or wind damage, but it's about the quality of the syrup. And the ease of cooking. Our method is basically . . . the same method that was used back in the [19]50s, or even before. So, he liked those, even though over the years we have tried a lot of the newer varieties with Dale and M81-E and Topper. But still, the old varieties, even though we have a lot of faults, we like them the best. But we can't plant all old varieties because of the disease resistance. You know? If we planted all old varieties, disease could hit all of it and we'd have zero sorghum. You know? So, we have to plant some of the newer, more disease-resistant stuff each year, just to where we would be able to—we might not make a lot of syrup, but we'd make a little bit of syrup.

[00:24:17.06]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What are some of those old varieties you like to use?

[00:24:19.18]

Terry H.: Honey Drip. Sugar Drip. Orange. There is an old, old variety that we've not grown here since back in the [19]70s, and it was Williams. It really, it done good. I'm working now to try to get to what few seed I have left, get those built back up to enough that it would be safe to plant a few acres to try it again. But any of those old varieties like that seem very good.

[00:24:58.00]

Annemarie A.: That's great. That's another question I can of have. Where do you get those kind of older-variety seeds?

[00:25:05.24]

Terry H.: Well, the Williams that I'm talking about, I would not know of any place other than the seed that I've got. There is no place. And a lot of these names on the sorghum, sweet sorghum, that was a certified seed that you could get once, but they's possibly that same thing out there, but it's by a different name. You know? But what we would buy would be actually certified, certified Williams seed. And then they came out with an improved Williams later on. But the Orange and a lot of the Sugar Drip, Honey Drip, there's—if you're gonna buy seed like that, the old varieties, Danny Townsend, Jeffersonville, Kentucky. And he has a lot of the older seed and newer varieties, too. Another place you can get newer varieties is University of Mississippi. They have the Theis and Dale, M81E, and Topper-76. A lot of those seed all, where there's an experiment station, Georgia Experiment Station out here at Blairsville, all of those seed that the University of Mississippi sells now at one time were experimental, trial-basis out here at Blairsville.

We would take, and before those seed was ever released, for years, we might grow what became Dale. We might be trying that on a small amount before it was ever released to the public. They would let us have a few seed to plant. They would plant that theirselves out here at the experiment station, and they would bring the cane over, and we would process it into syrup. They would weigh the cane pummies and the amount of juice and everything and determine all their stuff. Is it a good yield or does it make a good quality syrup? All that.

[00:27:31.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, you always had kind of like a good relationship with Georgia extension?

[00:27:38.18]

Terry H.: Well, with the experiment station out here, like I said, we would—and I'm sure there was other local mills that would do the same thing that Dad would do here. Because the experiment station, they had no place to process the syrup, so they had to rely on local mills to find out that true, is it gonna make a good quality syrup, does it yield a lot of gallons, and this and that. As far as the disease resistance, well, they really would not have to even rely on a local mill to determine that. In other words, if some type of blight hit it, well, you could out in the field and look and see and tell that.

[00:28:26.06]

Annemarie A.: That's cool. Another thing I kind of want to ask that you've kind of touched on is the relationship of the sorghum plant to ground, because it seems to be more so than some other crops, like where you plant it really matters. It affects the taste and stuff.

[00:28:43.18]

Terry H.: It does. In fact, the taste, possibly the color of the syrup, most syrup from this area—and I don't know if this area's unique or whatever—but over the years, from childhood up to now, I remember a lot of light-colored sorghum syrup being made. Not that dark wasn't made but I just remember a lot of light-colored sorghum syrup being in made in the area. And especially here at Mother and Dad's place. Just a lot of light-colored syrup. And Dad always said that the ground is important, but you could take maybe on a given year, if the weather on that particular soil was exactly what a sorghum crop needed, it possibly would produce a good sorghum that year. So, he didn't shy away from—a lot of the old-timers will say, "Oh, don't plant your sorghum on black dirt, it'll make black syrup," but that might be true as an average, but in a given year, if that soil got the exact weather it needed on it, possibly it would make good syrup. A good color, good flavor.

[00:30:10.10]

Annemarie A.: So what's that kind of perfect weather?

[00:30:15.04]

Terry H.: Well, I would prefer a—if it's gonna go either way, a slightly dry year, and then of course you got—especially later on up in the season, you've got to have lots of sunlight.

Cloudy days just does not do it. You've got to have sunlight. Basically, you're trying to make sugars and you don't have good sunlight, you're just not gonna do it. In other words, your sugar content's gonna be low. Then it still will make a good-tasting syrup, it just takes more of that juice to arrive at that quart of syrup or gallon of syrup. If you've got a sweet juice, it could take six or seven gallons of juice to make a gallon of syrup. If it's not very sweet, well, might take ten, ten gallon or more. Twelve. To make that gallon of syrup. So, your syrup ends up sugar content basically the same, it just takes more juice to get that. So, that results in just lower yield. You know?

[00:31:20.05]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, I guess, moving on to the processes of harvesting, and even planting and just being out in the field and getting it to the mill, it seems to be that sorghum producers have to be a little more—have to very, you know, ingenious about the ways that they decide to or how they even make labor-saving things. Because it's a lot of labor.

[00:31:51.20]

Terry H.: Yeah, um-hm. Yeah.

[00:31:51.20]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about your process and if you kind of have any of those labor-saving, effective measures that you use?

[00:32:02.01]

Terry H.: Like I said, we—the only labor-saving thing that we actually have that we use is cutting the seed heads off. And other than that, if the cane is stripped of the leaves, that's done by hand. We do have a corn binder that we could use to cut the sorghum down with. But we do not use that very much. It does other stuff to it that we don't like, like breakage of the stalk. If it's any kinds of weeds or grass in the field, well, then that's gathered into that bundle. Sometimes, even though that part of it's quicker, you might spend more time tryin' to get that corrected, the weeds and the grass out of the bundle, than it would take to go ahead and just hand-cut it, you know. So, we still hand cut. And we've just not ever—ever tried a whole lot of stuff. We've tried mowing machines to cut it down with, you know, and that's fast. Seems very good while you're riding the tractor, going down through the field just really moving on, cutting the cane down. But then, somebody's gotta pick all that up. Well, it's spread out on the ground, making it very difficult to get an armful. To where, if you hand-cut that, you hand-cut it and you put it into piles. Well, then you just bend over and pick the pile up. So, the only part of cutting with a mowing machine that's good is if you're the one riding the tractor. [Laughter] And other than that, there's just no advantage to it.

[00:33:45.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:33:48.07]

Terry H.: So, the stripping, mostly, we do not—used to, back years ago, we'd hand-strip all of it.

We'd cut it down, put it into piles. We'd pick each stalk, three or four stalks at a time up, strip the leaves off, and lay that down, pick up three or four more stalks. And now, mostly, we take all the fodder off, and it's standing with a stick. We call 'em swords or paddles. We knock it off, in other words, and it's standing. It's harder to take and get all of it off, but a lot of people don't strip any leaves off. And that's perfectly fine, if you don't. But still sort of old-school on don't have anything to harvest it with, other than labor. [Laughter]

[00:34:44.23]

Annemarie A.: And what your labor? Who helps you?

[00:34:46.09]

Terry H.: Well, I've had migrant workers. Over the years, that's hard to—hard to keep 'em, basically because it's just a two-month thing. As years have went by, that's virtually impossible anymore, because a lot of 'em, they're looking for a little more long-term stuff. Some place that they can get six months' worth of work. So, it's hard for somebody that's got two months' worth of work to pull these migrant workers in when they can maybe go somewhere else and get six months' worth of work. That's what's very hard. So, it's basically narrowed down to where there's nobody left but few family members, and we're all gettin' older, to where we can't do as much as we used to, 'cause it hurts us too much.

[00:35:47.13]

Annemarie A.: Do you have any children or nieces and nephews to help?

[00:35:50.23]

Terry H.: I have some children. And one of 'em helped this year. She done all my jarring, canning up, of the syrup. She would stay here some on days and let me go to the field, or stay here to sell syrup, you know. But none of 'em actually, in other words, as far as saying is there somebody standing and waiting to take over, no. That's not the case. So.

[00:36:22.12]

Annemarie A.: How do you feel about that?

[00:36:24.10]

Terry H.: Well, I don't like it. [Laughter] Yeah, I don't like it one bit. But I mean, that possibly, it might end with me. I don't know. But I'd like to see it go on for another sixty-five years.

[00:36:45.19]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. So, I have a question about-- and this is . . . I guess we can kind of transition into like here, where we are right now, which is a building where you produce the actual syrup.

[00:37:03.00]

Terry H.: Right.

[00:37:03.21]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about your pan here, and how it's made and what's made out of?

[00:37:10.14]

Terry H.: Okay. It's basically about nineteen-foot long, and the old furnace is an old rock furnace. That thing has been there since . . . first year it was used was 1959. That's after we moved from Blairsville. But anyway, the pan is still old school. It's copper, a very fairly thick copper. Not hardly as thick as a penny, but anyway, it's copper-bottom, copper bars, copper sides, but it has self-skimmers on it. And they're made out of yellow poplar. It's been—the copper's probably thirty- to forty-year old. Keep having to replace the wood ever so many years. You could use a stainless. Dad tried a stainless pan back in the [19]60s, and 'course, that was back when they were so busy cooking, just a day or two down on a pan for whatever reason would be a big thing, because they was just havin' to cook just basically six days a week on two pans. So, he tried a stainless pan on my mom's furnace, and he spent about two days trying to-- took the copper pan off and put the stainless on-- trying to get it to boil correctly. The boil means everything. If it's not the correct boil, to where you could get rid of the skim, the impurities, you're not gonna turn out with a good-quality syrup. Well, he could not get that to work the way he wanted. It wasn't like he had all the time in the world to keep playin' with that pan, to get that to boil right. So, he opted to just take the pan off and he put the old copper pan back on. And everything was fine. But that doesn't mean that the copper pan would not work, it's just,

he didn't have the time to try to-- what he actually needed woulda been a third furnace with a stainless pan on it, that way you could maintain your two-pan cooking every day, and he would have that third pan that he could've took and it wouldn't of played with the stainless pan till he got it working correctly. But anyway. He had to take it off, and he never put it back on. He sold the pan and he never tried it again.

[00:39:53.22]

Annemarie A.: That's something else. So, did your dad cook with propane or with wood?

[00:40:00.14]

Terry H.: Started in [19]54 with wood, and then when they moved over here, first year he cooked was [19]59 here in Young Harris. It was wood. Then he built—the next year—he built another pan for Mom. A furnace. Anyway, and it was wood. Then, in [19]61, he converted his pan to propane. But he did not convert Mom's to propane. The reason being, he didn't—he wanted to take and get, make sure the propane that he could get it working correctly. So, he done his pan first in [19]61 and got it to boiling correct. Anyway, he kept Mom's wood-fired till the next year, so hers went to propane in [19]62. 'Course, Mom did not fire. We had a fire man that fired. So, but anyway, converted hers in 1962 to propane.

[00:41:12.04]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, I guess this is something I haven't asked, too. It's going back a little bit, but you mentioned the fire man. What—your parents were just kind of the two of them, and what other kind of labor, who else helped them run this place?

[00:41:30.25]

Terry H.: Back then, it was just a different . . . different way of life. You could get local help everywhere. It was just, it was just help everywhere. They would be a good fire man, really needed to know sorta where to put that wood. Not just to throw it up under there anywhere. But they was about two or three around that had actually been around the mill enough that, if Dad needed to, say a fire man for Mom, he had two or three people that he could contact. And 'course, she's throwed wood up under there herself. But most of the time, it was—a lot of times—Dad, he would fire his pan, cook syrup. He might fire her pan a little bit, help out. But there was plenty of help back then in the [19]50s, [19]60s, and [19]70s. They was absolutely people running everywhere.

[00:42:40.29]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:42:41.02]

Terry H.: So, it was not like today. Today, it's sort of like a ghost town. [Laughter]

[00:42:47.21]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. I haven't asked about your mom other than just what her name is. So, Mrs. Hughes, was she—how did she feel about this operation? Did she like being out here? What was that like?

[00:43:05.08]

Terry H.: I hope that she liked it as much—and Dad, too, as many hours as they spent up here. And 'course, too, while they was doing all this, they still had the cattle, still had chickens. And we done hatching eggs. They had to be gathered three times a day. And 'course, had help. You could get help back then. But I'm sure she enjoyed it. But I'm sure there's time, a lot of times, she didn't enjoy it a whole lot. But and too, you got to be around neighbors and stuff. So . . .

[00:43:44.17]

Annemarie A.: Did she know how to cook before they started this operation?

[00:43:48.24]

Terry H.: She actually would—as far as cooking, that's just like me. Nobody taught me how to cook, it's sort of like, if you're around it and you pay any attention at all, you're gonna learn stuff. That's sort of the way Mom was, as far as her cooking. Then, of course, Dad, he taught his self how to cook syrup. I asked him, "How do you teach yourself how to do anything?" He said, "Well, son, if you've got any sense at all and you do something and you know it don't turn out right, you need to change something." [Laughter] 'Till eventually, you get it the way that you think that it ought to be. And so, that's sort of how

he learned to cook syrup. In other words, it was no doubt a lot of mistakes. And he learnt by it.

[00:44:42.05]

Annemarie A.: That's great, that's good. I kind of—this is also going back—you're talking about the scope of you seeing this boom of people, of a demand in the [19]60s and [19]70s and that kind of trails off in the [19]80s. Could you talk about the scope of how you've seen, like, the demand for this product? And why you think it's kind of trickled into people maybe don't have as much of a demand for it?

[00:45:12.22]

Terry H.: Right, yeah. Well, a lot of that's just lifestyle. People . . . they, you don't order sorghum syrup at a drive-thru window. [Laughter] Basically, they don't—it's like a lot of stuff. They don't have the time. Everything's too big of a rush. That's one of the reasons on the decline. But now, it has picked back up in recent years. The last ten or fifteen years, sorghum syrup has picked back up, and a lot of that is different shelves are using it, so it's not that dreaded decline anymore. In other words, you can actually be going the other way now. But for years, there was nothing that you could do, basically, that was gonna make that go back up. And as far as this area, the reason the decline was about in the 1985, startin' in the early [19]80s around [19]85, for whatever reason, a lot of the growers— of course, they had got older and they was wanting to quit anyway, but a lot of them what made them decide that I ain't gonna fool with the sorghum no more, is a lot of diseases started hitting. Blights and stuff started hitting the sorghum. And I don't know if

their seed become diseased or whatever, but a lot of 'em would maybe plant that same seed back, and then the next year, it'd be the same thing. My dad called this one blight, he called it fire blight. You could go look at your crop, it looked perfectly good, and go back a week or two later, it'd be just like it was on fire. It'd be dried up. So, a lot of people were already getting older and thinking about, well, I'm gonna have to quit this someday. Well, that was the deciding factor that told them, it's time to quit. So it went from . . . from lots of lots of growers to down to just two, to a handful, and basically, in five years it did. Then, eventually, that got down to just us as a family, producing the syrup. In other words, what Dad would grow, which would be very little, and what I would grow and my sister and brother and stuff. Even though they would still be a little, few people, grow a little and bring it here to be processed. It really never amounted to much. So, it basically just ended up just us as a family. And then, of course, family members started dropping out. 'Course, now, it's just down to me.

[00:48:09.22]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Who are the people that you sell to now? Who are the people that kind of have the demand for your sorghum?

[00:48:21.00]

Terry H.: As far as you mean large wholesale?

[00:48:24.27]

Annemarie A.: Anything.

[00:48:25.02]

Terry H.: Biggest part of it is sold right here. Just the retail, just people coming by. A lot of people, they'll come from quite a ways away. They'll plan 'em a day trip. Those sales are, by far, better once the leaves and stuff start turning and there's festivals and stuff going on. There's more stuff to do in the area, so that's when people plan their trips. It's just their annual trip. They might stop and get sorghum syrup, buy local honey. All from right, from the northeast Georgia area right here, you know. But that's how most of it is sold, right here. I do wholesale. And that would be the same thing. They want to stock up on that, during that fall of the year, because people just come to know and expect that sorghum syrups happens in September and October, basically. That's the time you get this year's crop of syrup, fresh syrup.

[00:49:39.02]

Annemarie A.: That's interesting. You might not be able to tell me this, but who do you wholesale to?

[00:49:45.11]

Terry H.: Well, it could be . . . anything from local . . . got apple orchards, down here at the Ellijay, Blue Ridge. There's some family-owned grocery stores and Jaemor farms, which is a pretty good-sized place here at Gainesville that does all kind of stuff. They've got orchards and just basically about any kind of vegetables or anything. They stay open year-round. A lot of smaller grocery store chains, you know. And places that you

wouldn't even think—meat-packing places, processing places. Roadside stands. 'Course, I mean, they're just scattered everywhere; just anybody that basically can think, "Well, hey, we want to get a four, five, six, eight cases of this. We can make us a little extra money. We're gonna be there at the fruit stand anyway; let's make us a little extra money." So, we try to cater to that and help 'em out. Too, that's just a way of spreading the product out without us having to take it there. Whatever, you know. Most everything, just like I said, it's sold right here. They come and get it. I do have one person that actually does—he calls and makes the sales on the syrup, similar to the old-time peddlers, we used to call it. He'll come by, basically, and purchase the syrup from me, and then he goes and delivers it to wherever he's made the sales at.

[00:51:48.15]

Annemarie A.: That's pretty interesting. So, this is kind of like a larger question. But out of just the entire process, what are the biggest challenges of growing and harvesting and producing this product?

[00:52:03.24]

Terry H.: All of 'em. Really, the harvest is it. As far as like here, I can take in a given day, me and one other person and we can make a hundred and fifty, two hundred gallon of syrup. But it's your fieldwork. And getting it, basically, getting that product into juice. Once it's into juice, it's not that there's no work left. There's plenty of work left, but it's easier work. Other words, I'd a lot rather stand here today and cook syrup—or bottle syrup—as to be out in the field, doing any of the other, you know. So, just a harvesting method. And

would have to build something similar to what other people across the United States have made. Most any of those machines that, where it's machine-harvested, would be—you would basically be going, and you would not be stripping your cane. In other words, if you were hand-harvesting, that's the number one labor in the field, is the stripping of the leaves. So most of your harvesters, they forget the stripping of the leaves. Now, it might get rid of some of the leaves. It might chop it up into joints and they might blow, probably, the fodder out and everything. But it's still not stripped. And as, like I said, that's fine. But they do that, and a lot of 'em will squeeze the juice in the field, that way, the only thing you're hauling out of the field is just the juice. Others may chop that up into small pieces, blow what fodder they can out that's loose, haul those pieces back to their mill operation, pan operation. Then they'll feed that, convey that into their mill, and juice the product on-site instead of out in the field. Either one of 'em's fine. Basically, at some point, would be what I'd have to do to continue on making any gallons, if it was going to be anything more than, say, just a hobby. In other words.

[00:54:37.28]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense. Well, how do you produce your sorghum? Could you take us through the steps of getting it from, just, like raw juice to the syrup?

[00:54:49.27]

Terry H.: Well, as far as once it's into juice, we take and start up of a morning, in other words you just cover the bottom of your pan with juice. And, 'course, now instead of building a fire, just light the burner. It will take it and start boiling. Our pan, it's—like I said, it's an

old-style. But the boiling process on it—it's doing the skimming on one end; all of the skim collects on one end of the pan, and then on the far end, the high end of the pan, is the end that the syrup comes off of. So, it's boiling, evaporating the water out, getting the skim out, everything on the pan. When you first fire it up, it would take . . . if it was sweet juice, it'd take about an hour before you would be running syrup off into the canning tank about an hour from now. Now, if the juice is not as sweet. I mean, it can take longer than that. And then, once you get to going, it's just basically juice pouring in on one end of the pan, and syrup coming off on the other end of the pan. It's just a continuous operation. It's not a pan-full, not batch cooking. And, according to the sugar content, the most we've cooked on this one pan is two hundred and twenty-six gallon in a day. That was very sweet juice, and that was sort of an extra-long day. Probably an average, if it's average sugar content in an average day of cooking, length of time, probably a hundred and fifty to a hundred and seventy-gallon being the average. But we have cooked all day and just made a hundred gallon, because the sugar content was so low that we just had to evaporate so much water, it just slowed down the amount of syrup it's pouring out. So, in a day's time, we ended up just making, say, a hundred gallon instead of that one seventy-five or two hundred. But we do not preheat our juice. A lot of syrup makers preheat their juice. We do not. Once their syrup is in the canning tank, we do not cool the syrup before bottling. We bottle it hot. I do set the jars out of the box and put out on a table and have fans blowing on that to cool it off somewhat quicker, you know. But either one of those ideas is fine; in other words, there's nothing wrong with the cooling of the syrup. For sure, nothing wrong with the settling of the juice or heating your

juice and holding it overnight, letting it settle overnight till the next day and then processing it the next day. I mean, that's a good thing. We just don't do it here.

[00:58:11.29]

Annemarie A.: You do it your own way.

[00:58:13.00]

Terry H.: [Laughter]

[00:58:15.04]

Annemarie A.: That's been the interesting thing that I've found; there's so many ways to do the same thing.

[00:58:19.05]

Terry H.: That's right, yeah.

[00:58:21.29]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. That's cool. What kind of relationships do you have with other sorghum makers? And how does that kind of help your process, or does it?

[00:58:30.16]

Terry H.: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. A lot of other sorghum makers—and, of course, a member of the National Sweet Sorghum Association. That's really—and Dad was a member for, gosh, I

don't know. Possibly since it was founded in 1985, I believe. But that's just a lot of friends, we'll call it, that you've got a common interest. And that's sorghum making. Hey. And you can talk to them and you get ideas and stuff, say, "You know, I wonder why I hadn't never thought about that?" You know. It's really been a lot of help. It don't matter if you're a small-time sorghum producer or you produce lots of sorghum; you can always learn something. I don't think you'll ever learn everything there is to know about making sorghum syrup.

[00:59:30.06]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense. I have one more big question for you, then I'll open it up—

[Telephone rings] That's okay, do you need to take that?

[00:59:35.10]

Terry H.: No.

[00:59:39.27]

Annemarie A.: Okay. [Laughter] Well, my big question is, why is this important to you? Why is growing and making sorghum and keeping this tradition alive, why is that important to you?

[00:59:54.01]

Terry H.: Well . . . well, one thing is, the family tradition. I mean, 'course, I tell you what, on a good year, we make some pretty good living at it. Not a get-rich living, but a pretty good

living. I just like to . . . I don't know, I guess see it continue on. But that's the two main things, is sixty-five years and I'd like to see it go to seventy or seventy-five or eighty or, you know. But right now, I mean, the reason I do it—besides just enjoying it—is just the way to make a little money. And of course, I have a little bit of other stuff on the farm, and make money, got cattle and stuff like that. But the syrup-making, I enjoy that. I do. I enjoy the syrup-making. Get to meet people, a lot of them once a year, that's all you see 'em.

[01:01:08.24]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do you think that there's any—I mean, have you seen any interest in the community, maybe, of younger folks who would be interested in helping or continuing on?

[01:01:21.23]

Terry H.: Well, yeah, possibly some. Yeah. But it's . . . I don't know. I think that's same reason on the labor, why you can't find labor anymore. It's almost like people do not want to do physical labor anymore. I think that's . . . a lot to do with maybe my kids. It's just they're . . . as far as getting out in the field and just getting your hands dirty. In other words, they might not want to be farmers, is what it is. It might be anything to do with syrup-making. It's just they don't want to be farmers, you know. Old-time farmers. If it's something where you're setting in a machine or whatever and that might would be a little bit better, but just getting out and doing the old-time harvest and stuff, they're just not into that. And 'course, as I get older, I'm not into it either. [Laughter] In other words, I get to thinking

about machinery and stuff. But there is some, but it's just not much. It's been, basically, that's why as far as this area, it's just been a decline. I'm sure if you can make everything to where you could just go out and drive something and everything done, have your pan, get to computer-run where you could just mash a button and it would program it to cook your syrup, there'd probably be a lot of people get into it then.

[01:03:06.17]

Annemarie A.: I guess so. Is there anything else you want to add?

[01:03:09.09]

Terry H.: I don't know, I think pretty well might of covered it all. I don't know.

[01:03:14.17]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you so much.

[01:03:16.18]

Terry H.: [Laughter] Yeah, thank you.

[*End of interview*]