



Martha and Gene Brown
Muscadine, AL

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

[00:00:00.00]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Here we go. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, November 26, 2018, and I am in Muscadine, Alabama at the home of Mr. Gene and Mrs. Martha Brown. Will you two please . . . each introduce yourself for the recorder and give us your names and birthdates?

[00:00:26.28]

Martha B.: Okay. I'm Martha Brown. My birthdate is 10-22-1946.

[00:00:31.08]

Annemarie A.: Thank you. Will you introduce yourself for the recorder, tell us your name and your birthdate?

[00:00:38.11]

Gene B.: Well, like I said, I've been—

[00:00:43.03]

Martha B.: No, tell her your name.

[00:00:43.20]

Gene B.: I didn't even want to tell her—

[00:00:45.12]

Martha B.: She wants you to tell her your name.

[00:00:47.28]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:00:48.21]

Martha B.: She wants you to tell her your name.

[00:00:50.16]

Gene B.: My name is Gene Autry Brown.

[00:00:57.27]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Brown.

[00:01:00.17]

Martha B.: And when is your birth date?

[00:01:02.16]

Gene B.: Ah . . .

[00:01:07.08]

Martha B.: 12. 12-26-[19]40.

[00:01:09.02]

Gene B.: Yeah.

[00:01:11.24]

Martha B.: Say it.

[00:01:13.22]

Gene B.: 12.

[00:01:13.22]

Martha B.: 26.

[00:01:14.10]

Gene B.: 26.

[00:01:17.04]

Martha B.: 1940.

[00:01:17.05]

Gene B.: 1940.

[00:01:18.12]

Martha B.: Yeah.

[00:01:20.05]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you very much. So, I wanted just to do a verbal assent for you. Ms. Martha, already signed for you. But is it okay if we have this interview with you in it in our archives?

[00:01:35.00]

Martha B.: Yes. Say yes.

[00:01:38.00]

Gene B.: Yes.

[00:01:39.16]

Martha B.: Say it louder.

[00:01:41.23]

Gene B.: Yes.

[00:01:42.08]

Annemarie A.: Okay, thanks. Well, let's get started, then. Can we talk a little bit about what you remember about growing up here?

[00:01:51.23]

Gene B.: Yeah. Daddy, he was . . . Daddy come out . . .

[00:02:07.27]

Martha B.: He was a preacher.

[00:02:09.01]

Gene B.: I didn't know he was a preacher, but he was also a person that's making stuff out of the thing you'll be using and everything.

[00:02:22.05]

Martha B.: The sorghum?

[00:02:22.11]

Gene B.: The sorghum.

[00:02:24.14]

Martha B.: But what she wants to know is, like, growing up here in Muscadine—

[00:02:29.15]

Gene B.: Yes, why. Why do you want know?

[00:02:30.25]

Martha B.: How about it? Tell her about it.

[00:02:33.26]

Gene B.: Well, Daddy, he'll tell you what he wants done and what he's gonna have done. We messed it up. He was pretty mad when he got seeing some of his stuff out. So . . . that's why I got so many of these things, why I had this done this morning.

[00:03:13.16]

Martha B.: You worked in the fields.

[00:03:15.28]

Gene B.: I did.

[00:03:17.14]

Martha B.: Tell her what kind of crops you had.

[00:03:18.15]

Gene B.: I don't want nobody to know that.

[00:03:22.15]

Martha B.: No, that's part of what she's doing.

[00:03:23.18]

Gene B.: Oh. Well, she'll be . . .

[00:03:29.12]

Martha B.: But tell her. She doesn't know.

[00:03:30.07]

Gene B.: Know what?

[00:03:31.29]

Martha B.: What kind of crops your daddy grew.

[00:03:33.22]

Gene B.: Just about anything.

[00:03:37.15]

Martha B.: Well, tell her about it.

[00:03:41.18]

Gene B.: I haven't . . . talked about anything to make it . . .

[00:03:51.10]

Martha B.: She's asking about growing up as a kid here in Muscadine.

[00:03:55.11]

Gene B.: It was hard.

[00:03:57.12]

Martha B.: Okay, all right.

[00:03:57.17]

Annemarie A.: Why was it hard?

[00:03:59.01]

Gene B.: Well, a lot of times, Daddy, he was a . . . a kind of person that he tells you to do this and if you don't do this, you got a red butt after that. But whenever things were going good, Dad, he was happy. But we had a lot of . . . cotton. Cotton was our main thing that we depended on. And then, we found out that wasn't what was better, but Daddy wasn't the kind of fellow that, you show him something and he'll take it and make two more out of it or another of that.

[00:05:02.11]

Martha B.: Tell her about the time he decided to grow bell peppers. Do you remember that?

[00:05:08.06]

Gene B.: Yeah . . .

[00:05:09.15]

Martha B.: Tell her about that.

[00:05:14.27]

Gene B.: Well . . . it was rows and planted. Dad, he liked it. That was our main thing then. First time we shifted over to . . . having . . . what?

[00:05:53.23]

Martha B.: Bell peppers.

[00:05:53.23]

Gene B.: Yeah, bell peppers. And we made pretty good money out of that. Every year, it got a little sliver or a little slimmer. After about five years, it wasn't worth the money to get it. But Daddy still put out some, and we got it out. 'Course, as we got older, the people that live with us, they found out they could make more money going out with the people that was working there, and get more stuff.

[00:06:50.21]

Martha B.: You talking about your brothers?

[00:06:52.17]

Gene B.: Yeah.

[00:06:53.06]

Martha B.: As they got old enough, they left home and found public works jobs. [Laughter]

[00:07:01.22]

Gene B.: They did.

[00:07:04.01]

Martha B.: And then you raised chickens.

[00:07:06.08]

Gene B.: Yeah. Mother done a lot in that. She was . . . you know. And eggs, I liked to get the eggs. See if I could get it, get it to the house. And if I got—we had enough, we could set some more chickens out. If you wanted it, 'cause after that, you got plenty of chicken per eggs. We ate it. That's why I'm so—

[00:08:00.24]

Martha B.: And you had to milk a cow.

[00:08:03.06]

Gene B.: [Inaudible 08:05]

[00:08:05.18]

Martha B.: That was your job, wasn't it?

[00:08:07.17]

Gene B.: No.

[00:08:08.21]

Martha B.: Oh, I thought it was.

[00:08:09.03]

Gene B.: Unh-huh.

[00:08:10.12]

Martha B.: Oh. I thought it was. Whose job was it?

[00:08:11.18]

Gene B.: Yours, if you was—

[00:08:14.08]

Martha B.: No, I wasn't here. I didn't live here.

[00:08:16.00]

Gene B.: Oh, okay.

[00:08:17.11]

Martha B.: Who milked the cow?

[00:08:17.11]

Gene B.: Huh?

[00:08:17.11]

Martha B.: Who milked the cow?

[00:08:18.28]

Gene B.: Well . . . seven or eight year old, kid was not very put in it.

[00:08:36.03]

Martha B.: Oh, okay. So, your mama wouldn't let a seven- or eight-year-old go milk the cow.

Your mama wouldn't let a seven- or eight-year-old go milk the cow.

[00:08:44.18]

Gene B.: That's about right. [Laughter] But a lot of that, whenever you . . . got to check eggs and

stuff, well, if we was good and fast, you could get to seven or ten eggs and put 'em on the

market. 'Cause everybody walked, they didn't any people have anything to run.

[00:09:24.12]

Martha B.: Okay. But his daddy was a Baptist preacher. 'Course, he preached.

[00:09:29.28]

Gene B.: When he said, "Amen," it was "Amen." [Laughter]

[00:09:33.17]

Martha B.: He preached at churches in Cleburne County.

[00:09:40.23]

Annemarie A.: What was your mom and dad's names?

[00:09:45.20]

Gene B.: Mother was . . . what was her name?

[00:09:50.27]

Martha B.: Bernice. Bernice.

[00:09:54.20]

Gene B.: Bernice, it was.

[00:09:54.20]

Martha B.: Bernice Lily Whit Brown.

[00:09:58.02]

Gene B.: Yeah.

[00:09:59.01]

Martha B.: And his daddy was Silas Phillip Brown.

[00:10:01.08]

Annemarie A.: That's nice.

[00:10:03.09]

Gene B.: Yeah.

[00:10:04.09]

Annemarie A.: Mrs. Brown, would you like to talk about where you were born and a little about your growing up years?

[00:10:09.05]

Martha B.: I was born in Bowdon, Georgia. When Mother, they brought me home to a farm in Cleburne County, near Hopewell community. I was born, well, in 1946 after World War II ended. So, Daddy began to farm. He had a syrup mill. The farm was on the river, which was important to make syrup 'cause you needed the water. So, he had the farm started and going. Then the Korean conflict broke out. So, he was called back to serve during that time. So, having served during World War II and then during Korea, he had so many years that he just decided he would stay in the military. And he made his career in the military. So, after making that decision, then the farm was sold. And all of the equipment. So, I was really not old enough to remember him making syrup; I just heard

other relatives on my daddy's side talk about him making syrup. And so, after he decided to make the military his career, well then, I was bounced here and there. [Laughter] Went to schools in North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, New Jersey.

[00:12:18.23]

Annemarie A.: So, you were everywhere.

[00:12:19.25]

Martha B.: I was everywhere. He retired from the military in the summer of 1962. We moved to Birmingham. He got a job with the city of Birmingham, maintenance department, and so graduated high school in Birmingham and went to JSU, and that's where he and I met, through his sister, who was a student at JSU.

[00:12:46.07]

Annemarie A.: Oh, that's nice.

[00:12:48.18]

Martha B.: Yeah. Then we got married in 1969 and lived in Houston for a year. Came back here and made our home here, after that year in Houston. Have lived here ever since.

[00:13:03.17]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:13:04.28]

Martha B.: Yeah.

[00:13:06.08]

Annemarie A.: So, I have a question about your dad and his syrup mill. What were some of the things that you might remember about your relatives saying about his operation or some things that he would remember and tell you guys about?

[00:13:17.15]

Martha B.: Well, it was definitely a mule-drawn operation. And of course, like I said, it was near water, because—we've often wondered how that all worked, because we have hoses attached to faucets. And if it needs a little water, you just squirt it. But I'm sure they just had their water handy. But they always wanted their—I've been told—they've always wanted their syrup mills and syrup pans near water, I'm sure for easy clean-up and things. But now, my daddy's half-brother, whose name was Chester Warren, he made syrup. He lived on the river, and he and his wife made syrup. We've been told that people would laugh and say that my Aunt Estella could make better syrup than my Uncle Chester. [Laughter] She was the better syrup maker. But they were into syrup-making, in a much bigger way. Like I said, with my dad deciding to make the military his career, his syrup-making ended basically in probably not much more than two years that he had the farm that it was a workable farm for him, before he decided to sell it.

[00:14:51.18]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:14:54.21]

Martha B.: But on one occasion, one of my Uncle Chester and Aunt Estella's daughters, she had her son bring her up here to observe, and she had knowledge. You know, she would step up to the pan and she would start doing it. Then she'd say, "You probably don't want me tellin' you this." And of course, he'd say, "Yes, tell me anything that you have that will help me to do this better." She would show techniques that she had watched her mama and daddy do and that she had learned. She had learned to make syrup, but of course, she didn't grow up—after she married, she didn't do that, but she had grown up with the syrup making. That was enjoyable for her to share what information she had.

[00:15:52.16]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What river did your Uncle Chester and Aunt Estella live—

[00:15:57.19]

Martha B.: Tallapoosa.

[00:16:00.04]

Annemarie A.: Cool.

[00:16:00.12]

Martha B.: Yeah, on the Tallapoosa.

[00:16:00.21]

Annemarie A.: And Muscadine's in Cleburne County.

[00:16:03.08]

Martha B.: Mm-hm, Cleburne.

[00:16:04.28]

Annemarie A.: Cool.

[00:16:04.28]

Martha B.: Clee-burn. [Laughter]

[00:16:02.18]

Annemarie A.: Clee-burn, I'm sorry. [Laughter]

[00:16:08.28]

Martha B.: I'm just joking.

[00:16:10.26]

Annemarie A.: You have to learn how to say everything.

[00:16:12.13]

Martha B.: That's right.

[00:16:11.01]

Annemarie A.: I'm learning that. Maybe we can talk a little bit about you guys getting your start in sorghum and kind of over the years, what it's become.

[00:16:25.04]

Martha B.: Okay. Well, kind of the way that it really got started—and I just learned this, in a sense, through him—but he retired from his public job in 1996. So, that left him with time to grow cane and harvest it and do it. But anyway, he also had time to take my dad to places. He would take him to the doctor's or if he needed to go to Birmingham or something, he was available to drive for him. So, he's told me that on those trips, that that was one of the topics that they would always talk about, was making sorghum syrup. So, whenever he retired, like I said, and had the time available, he just decided that he would grow some cane and do it for my daddy. And so, that's what he did. He grew the first patch, and I believe that first year was—I believe the first year they made cane was in 1997. He grew the first field of patch—he called it a patch. [Phone rings]

[00:18:17.14]

Annemarie A.: Oh, jeez.

[00:18:17.14]

Martha B.: He called it a patch. He never called it an acreage. You know, people will call and say, "How many acres did you plant this year?" He'll say, "Well, I don't plant acres. I just plant patches." Anyway, he planted a patch. The gentleman that—and I don't really know how he got in touch, knew about this man named Reo Benefield, but he got in touch with Reo Benefield, and Rio's daddy had made syrup. He had a pan. He had a mill. And they agreed that Rio would get his pan out and get his mill working, and they would make the cane that he grew that year down at the Benefield farm. So, that's what they did. My dad was able to come for a little while, and observe, to watch. But that's how the first cane was—why the first cane was grown—just because he and my dad got to talking about it, and they just decided, he decided that it would be something good for my dad.

[00:19:56.19]

Annemarie A.: That's good. What was your father's name?

[00:19:57.28]

Martha B.: Henry Gaines Smith.

[00:20:00.18]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:20:02.25]

Martha B.: Yeah.

[00:20:04.03]

Annemarie A.: Mr. Brown, do you remember growing that first patch of cane? Can you tell me a little bit about that, if you remember it?

[00:20:11.20]

Gene B.: Now, what?

[00:20:19.16]

Martha B.: Growing the first patch of cane.

[00:20:21.19]

Gene B.: Well, that was done by hand. [Laughter] I didn't use a plow to plough it out. Well, actually, I guess you could say you plant it, and if some died or anything, we had to get it back to a point and let it—actually let it climb the . . .

[00:21:00.08]

Martha B.: He always—here comes one—he always planted more than he needed. Whenever he'd get through harvesting, people would be out there, go drive by, "Aren't you going to finish harvesting that cane?" "I've got all I want," he says. He just always planted a lot more than he ever, ever—this year, we just had a very small patch down there. This is probably the first year we've ever gathered all of it. But again, it was just a very small patch.

[00:21:33.24]

Gene B.: Hey, gang!

[00:21:35.29]

Martha B.: When we got through with it, we made about seven and a half gallons, was all the syrup we had from this year. But he never gathered all that he planted. And I don't remember a whole lot about that first, because I was still working, still teaching. But after that first year, Owen was down there. Owen and Carrie were down there that first year. But after that first year, then he got his own pan. He and his brother went for—that you'll interview in a little bit. They did a lot of shopping. [Laughter] Lot of traveling around. 'Course, he built the first pan. He built his own, he built his pan, his copper pan himself. But finding the mills and things, they did a lot. So, they got the first furnace setup and got his pan. In 19—the next year, in [19]98, he was ready to make syrup here at home instead of somewhere else.

[00:22:51.06]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Do you remember that first year that you guys cooked sorghum here, what it was like?

[00:22:57.12]

Martha B.: It was very hard. [Laughter] He's right, it's pretty hard. They had—I mean, they had a lot of sorghum cane, a lot of cane then, because they planted a lot. Again, though, he seldom ever harvested all that he grew. I would—we'd get up, they'd get started early. He

would get up, and this is the way I remember it: he would usually get up, he would go get the pan cleaned. And I don't know what you—well, you might not want to record this—but I don't know what you've learned in other interviews, but with him, his copper pan, when he got ready to cook syrup in it, it needed to shine like a new penny. Now, that was a hard job. That was the hardest job, especially on the very first day that you made syrup, 'cause it would take anywhere from three to four hours to get the pan shined and ready to meet his satisfaction. [Laughter] To go. But anyway, he would get up and he would start doin' that. And then Mr. Benefield—Reo—who was the syrup-maker, his friend, he would get here some time I think along around ten, ten o'clock, something like that, I think. He didn't get here for the cleaning part. Huh?

[00:24:47.28]

Gene B.: I don't know either.

[00:24:49.14]

Martha B.: Oh yes, you do. He wouldn't get here for that part. Then, when I got home from school, they would be ready for the jars to be filled. So, I would just come out, get home from school and I would go filling up the jar. So, being here during the daytime for the—but I do know, after I retired from teaching and was around, it was just a jovial time. They just had a lot of fun joking and laughing and carrying on. Had fun. Even though it was hard work, they had fun. Had fun doing it.

[00:25:34.14]

Annemarie A.: What about the community just around here in Muscadine? How did they react to you guys growing cane and cooking?

[00:25:44.25]

Martha B.: Oh, they loved it. I reckon they loved it. The Tallapoosa, Georgia area, there were syrup makers that were in the Tallapoosa area, but the majority of them were either getting too old to do it or getting out of the business. So, when he started doing it, I mean, people came. [Laughter] And they wanted the syrup. It was no trouble at all to sell gallons and gallons of syrup. An article appeared in the *Farm & Ranch* magazine about our process, and that season, we were just over—that's not the word I want . . . bombarded with orders from all across the United States. People would call and want a case of it. We shipped that year, we shipped so much syrup. Fortunately, we had it. We were blessed that we had it. But that was an unbelievable year that year. And some of those customers, we still have one that calls every year, and we have one that lives in California that still likes to get syrup from us to make her gingerbread men for Christmas. It all resulted from that article that came out in the *Farm & Ranch* magazine.

[00:28:00.17]

Annemarie A.: That's great. That's something else.

[00:28:01.21]

Martha B.: Yeah. But they'd want to say, "Do you take credit cards?" "No!" [Laughter] And the process, it was like—because we weren't in the business, we weren't a business. We were

just making syrup. So, shipping, determining the cost, the only way that I knew how to do it was—and I finally kind of determined, I would ship most of it by UPS. I'd put, like, six quarts in a box, get it packed, take it to UPS. We were very trusting. I'd take it to UPS, and they would tell me how much the shipping was going to be. I'd call the customer back and say, "The syrup plus the shipping's going to be this much. Just send us the money." Sometimes we shipped it before I got the money. Sometimes I would wait till we got their money. But that's the only way. Like nowadays, they have set shipping rates. Well, I couldn't determine the set shipping rate. I had no idea how to set a shipping rate. So, I'd just pack up my boxes and let UPS weigh 'em. After a while, I'd just say, "Well, that's how much six quarts weighs," and I'd tell 'em. But as the years went by, it dwindled as far as how many people continued to call us, which was okay with us. [Laughter] Like I say, we were not in the business to sell lots and lots of syrup. But the community around here, that was part of our main goal, was just to meet the needs of the local people that we knew and that we knew liked the syrup and would probably come and buy the syrup. We had one gentleman from Anniston, Alabama that would call us in June, and he would say, "I want my eleven quarts. I'll send you the money now." I'd say, "No, no, no. We might not even have any syrup. I don't want your money now." But he always wanted to get his eleven quarts spoken for so that I wouldn't sell it, we wouldn't sell it to anybody else. But anyway, I don't know if that answered your question. [Laughter]

[00:30:46.01]

Annemarie A.: No, that's great. That's so funny. Were there any folks besides Mr. Benefield that you talked about who kind of helped you guys or who would come and always be involved in the syrup-making process?

[00:31:04.10]

Martha B.: Well, there was a man from Auburn, but I can't remember his name. I think he saw the article. Maybe he saw the article. The article also appeared in the *Alfa* magazine, and he saw the article somewhere. So, he would come up. What was his name, Winford?

[00:31:21.18]

Winford B.: This is your interview.

[00:31:26.05]

Martha B.: Okay. I can't even remember his—but anyway, he would come and . . . well, this is interesting. Everybody that came always had their opinion of how it needed to be done and what could be done better. Or they used to joke, "This is how my daddy did it." "This is how Daddy did it." So, around the syrup mill, it was just like I say—they just carried on and had a good time. A good time. But I don't know that this would be of any interest to you as far as what you're trying to figure out, but Mr. Benefield, that was the syrup-maker, he and his mother and two of his brothers were murdered and robbed. They were robbed and then murdered in their home. So, my daddy used to tell him—he'd call him John instead of Gene—he'd say, "John, you need to tell Reo, you need to let Reo go and you start makin' the syrup. That's the only way you're gonna learn how is to start doing

it." 'Course, when Mr. Benefield died, he had to start doing it, but that was a very sad time for all of us.

[00:33:04.07]

Annemarie A.: I bet.

[00:33:05.27]

Martha B.: That that happened. So, he did have to start making syrup. He had to start making syrup, and I had to start making syrup. I retired in 2[0]05, and I became part of a team, I guess, as far as making syrup. [Laughter]

[00:33:27.27]

Annemarie A.: What were your duties besides packing all up, packing all of this syrup up to ship out?

[00:33:32.18]

Martha B.: And drawing it off into the jars. I did that. I helped clean the pan. I would squeeze some. Keep the snacks. The drinks and cold drinks and everything ready for 'em. Just being around and having a good time with 'em, I guess, was my duties. So. But yeah, helping clean the pan and getting the syrup in the jars was the main thing that I did. And shipping it.

[00:34:15.10]

Annemarie A.: That's good. You have one of the most important roles.

[00:34:18.08]

Martha B.: I guess so. [Laughter]

[00:34:23.03]

Annemarie A.: Mr. Brown, what was the hardest part, maybe, of making sorghum syrup?

[00:34:37.21]

Martha B.: What was the hardest part of making syrup?

[00:34:40.21]

Gene B.: Gettin' me enough and getting started.

[00:34:46.22]

Martha B.: The leaves off of it.

[00:34:48.04]

Gene B.: Yeah.

[00:34:49.06]

Martha B.: Stripping it.

[00:34:49.06]

Winford B.: Yeah. And the whole process of getting started.

[00:34:52.10]

Martha B.: Oh, well. Okay.

[00:34:54.06]

Gene B.: You had to cut the cane, you had to get it to mill, you had to squeeze it, and all this was the hard part. Once you got it on . . . the fire, over the fire, most of the work was done.

[00:35:15.08]

Martha B.: Yeah. But the hardest, the really hardest part, would be the cutting and the stripping.

[00:35:22.16]

Winford B.: Getting it ready.

[00:35:22.16]

Martha B.: 'Cause he has—I don't know if, in any of your interviews, you've heard these Super C tractors? Have you ever heard of anybody talk about an old Super C tractor?

[00:35:30.19]

Annemarie A.: Hm-mm.

[00:35:30.19]

Martha B.: Well, anyway, he's got two Super C tractors, which are what, about 1940s, [19]50s, [19]30s, [19]60s, [19]20s?

[00:35:42.10]

Winford B.: The Super Cs come out in the [19]50s.

[00:35:44.08]

Martha B.: Okay. So, they're old tractors. That's what he planted with.

[00:35:48.02]

Annemarie A.: Oh, wow.

[00:35:49.02]

Martha B.: And harvested with. So, it had planters, old-fashioned planters. Getting it planted was not the hard part, but getting it cut down and stripped—even though I didn't do a whole lot of that, I know that's the hard part. [Laughter]

[00:36:09.06]

Annemarie A.: Mr. Brown, what was your favorite part of making sorghum syrup?

[00:36:13.10]

Gene B.: Eatin' it. [Laughter]

[00:36:16.15]

Annemarie A.: What's your favorite way to eat it?

[00:36:20.26]

Gene B.: Well, I enjoy getting it up for 'em. Like you said. They would expect you to get them a first jar on it. Then they were happy.

[00:36:59.10]

Martha B.: What way did you like to eat it the best?

[00:37:02.16]

Gene B.: Well, I like to drink some of it. [Laughter]

[00:37:08.18]

Martha B.: You liked it with a hot buttered biscuit.

[00:37:12.27]

Gene B.: Oh. Sure enough?

[00:37:14.13]

Martha B.: Yes.

[00:37:15.16]

Gene B.: Oh.

[00:37:15.16]

Martha B.: [Laughter] He would take a little bit, put butter in it, stir it up to make sorghum and butter, and then eat a little hot buttered biscuit.

[00:37:20.10]

Gene B.: I wasn't the only one.

[00:37:24.26]

Martha B.: No, I know that. [Laughter] That's the way, anybody you ask. I know it. Anybody you ask. I have three times I had talked about making sorghum to fourth and fifth graders, three different times. One of the questions I've always asked them is, "How do you eat sorghum?" Those, there's a few, there's always a few that know about it. They'll say, "With a hot buttered biscuit." They know that you're supposed to eat it with a hot buttered biscuit.

[00:38:05.07]

Unidentified.: That's not the best way.

[00:38:05.07]

Martha B.: How's the best way?

[00:38:06.15]

Unidentified.: Cook it down to candy and put peanuts in it.

[00:38:12.15]

Martha B.: [Laughter] Yeah, peanut candy. Okay.

[00:38:17.17]

Annemarie A.: That's good.

[00:38:19.26]

Gene B.: You would know it as peanut brittle.

[00:38:23.04]

Annemarie A.: That is pretty good. So, let me think of something else to ask.

[00:38:37.11]

Gene B.: That's a lot for now.

[00:38:37.11]

Martha B.: I did think of something I thought you might be interested, but again, it's left me,
too.

[00:38:43.12]

Annemarie A.: Well, I have a question for you guys, I guess. We'll talk about this with the other interviews, too. What were some ways, some things that y'all did to make it easier on yourself? Because it is such a labor-intensive process. What were some things you tried to do to alleviate that a little bit?

[00:39:05.04]

Martha B.: Oh, a lot of things. [Laughter] That was always part of the fun, I think, for them. Now, not for me, because I wasn't in on all that. But that was always part of the fun, them trying to find, figure out, easier ways to do them.

[00:39:22.18]

Gene B.: Or quicker.

[00:39:24.26]

Martha B.: Or quicker. They were all, these two especially, were very machine-minded and mechanical-minded. So, they, we have pictures—well, they tried to, one of the things that he did, my Gene built, was a cutter that, when it worked well, it was very efficient. And it used, didn't it use the cutter from a hay baler? I mean, not the cutter from a hay baler, but a hay mower.

[00:40:03.11]

Gene B.: Mower.

[00:40:05.01]

Martha B.: And it was attached, run by electric motor. And it attached to his tractor. So, it had a cage, I guess that's what you call it—a cage on it. I guess one person could drive the tractor and then one person could stand at the cage and, as the mower cut it, then they could grab bundles and lay it in the flat. That was really quick. That was a very efficient way to cut the cane down. The last two or three years, because the fields are small, we'd cut it with a machete. But he built that. That was a very efficient way to—and then, they built what might have been the same piece, where they could go down and cut the heads off in the field before they would gather it. But they always cut it down after the first—I think maybe only two times did they strip it in the field. They always cut it down, brought it to the shade, and stripped it where they were not out in the hot, hot boiling sun to strip it.

[00:41:36.13]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense.

[00:41:37.05]

Martha B.: Yeah, that makes sense. [Laughter] Yeah, that made it okay, made it much better on everybody to—

[00:41:41.10]

Unidentifiable.: Be back in a minute.

[00:41:46.17]

Martha B.: To have it cut down like that. Then they were, like I said, it was not very . . . helped alleviate some of the heat.

[00:41:57.17]

Annemarie A.: Are there any other things that you want to talk about that we haven't talked about? Perhaps about the whole process?

[00:42:12.16]

Martha B.: Can you think of anything, Ellie?

[00:42:15.12]

Ellie: How about batch pan stuff?

[00:42:16.22]

Martha B.: I was thinkin' about that. Up until the last couple of years, we always used the evaporator pan. Like I said, he built the pan himself. But then, as the . . . we've not had good growing seasons. We've had very bad growing seasons the last couple years. He switched to a batch pan made of stainless steel. It's a lot. I don't know if it's—I don't know how you would describe it. As far as the difference between the batch pan and the evaporator pan, the batch pan, you don't have to, you have to do the same skimming and stuff and you have to be very aware when it's just about ready because it's gonna get

ready in a batch and it's not working its way down the baffles of the evaporator pan. But yeah, that's what we've used the last couple of years, is the batch pan.

[00:43:39.25]

Annemarie A.: What does it look like?

[00:43:39.29]

Martha B.: It's just a stainless-steel batch pan. It's just a stainless-steel square pan. It just fits— well, it's not big enough to fit over his whole furnace. He's got two. One holds thirty-five gallons and one holds, I want to say, about fifty gallons of juice. We've only used the thirty-five gallon one. We've used it twice this year. But he prefers the evaporator pan, but the copper—I mean, he built that pan, oh, gosh, say nineteen, eighteen years ago. Copper, as it ages, it gets little pinholes in it. In fact, we have a picture of when we had syrup that very first year. At the Benefield farm, they had fruit jars sitting all along the side of the pan to catch the drips that were coming, that might be coming out. But we never used it after it started leaking. Just went to a different pan. But he did prefer the evaporator pan. Like I said, it was copper. The batch pan, much easier to clean; copper's much easier to clean. I think it cooks efficiently. What?

[00:45:00.01]

Unidentified: Do it by temperature.

[00:45:01.00]

Martha B.: What?

[00:45:01.00]

Unidentified: Temperature. When you know, it's mainly by temperature. When you're talking about—

[00:45:06.03]

Martha B.: Oh, yeah, yeah. It is easier to use a thermometer in a batch pan than it is in an evaporator pan. So, of course, we have a little probe thermometer. But we never been . . . a brix, think it's a brix monitor, you've probably heard of it. We've never ever used that. The way they sample the sweetness of the juice, that's what he's talking about, drinking. They'd just squeeze a little bit of cane and drink the juice and see if it was sweet and all during the summer as it's growing. They would just cut a stalk down and peel back and chew a little bit. That's one way, the old-fashioned way, of determining if the cane is sweet. Getting ready and going to be sweet. That's what you're hoping for, is sweet cane.

[00:46:17.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Mr. Brown, is there anything else you want to tell me about sorghum-making?

[00:46:24.04]

Gene B.: About what?

[00:46:24.04]

Annemarie A.: Is there anything else you want to tell me about syrup making? Anything you remember?

[00:46:30.28]

Gene B.: Any of these can readily . . . I was going . . . what school I went to? And when I come home, I got, had that thing went to my head up there, and I never was what I—

[00:47:02.05]

Martha B.: Yes. He's just talkin' about whenever he kind of—we don't know if he had like a mini-stroke, what happened, whenever he just kind of forgot everything.

[00:47:17.07]

Gene B.: Bill, my brother Bill, he was driving that day. I had put it—look and see if he's out there.

[00:47:30.04]

Martha B.: No, Harold and Winford are looking at something out there.

[00:47:36.14]

Unknown: They're discussing the interview.

[00:47:39.08]

Martha B.: Oh, okay. They're talking about what they're gonna say. Winford and Harold are talking about what they're gonna say about syrup-making. But he, like I said, he doesn't, he can't really remember a whole lot about it since—

[00:47:56.25]

Gene B.: When I do think of what it is, she can't imagine I don't even know. [Laughter] You know that's true.

[00:48:08.06]

Annemarie A.: That's okay. Well, is there anything else either of you want to add?

[00:48:12.16]

Martha B.: Ah . . . you know, I don't know. I don't know that, this was not a . . . 'course, they might tell you this and you might—Winford especially—of growing up here, his daddy would only, as most farmers around here, would only grow enough cane. He never grew it as a cash crop, I'll put it, I think that might be the right word. As a cash crop. He would grow enough to take it to a mill and have syrup made for his family for the next year, for that winter. So, as far as them being an old syrup-making family of Muscadine and carrying on the art of doing that, that's not really what his, his was all about. The article you saw, the Brown brothers sticking together, it started after they were grown men. They were all retired from their jobs. It was just a time of fellowship for 'em, getting together, sticking together, because all of 'em except the younger brother, Bill, all of 'em took part. Had some role. The fireman or the head stripper or the main squeeze. They just

gave everybody—he did—just gave 'em all nicknames that had to do with the naming of the syrup. They'd joke about . . . their pay. [Laughter] You know, "We're gonna get a raise next year." But how much can it be when you get paid nothing? "What's my raise gonna be?" There was no money, ever. They'd get a jar of syrup for them or for somebody else, but it was just, that was the whole . . . idea of the article was just that the brothers came together later in life and started making sorghum syrup. Some of 'em still stick together. Making the syrup.

[00:51:14.04]

Annemarie A.: That's really nice. I have one last question and then we'll be through. Why is it important to you that your family does this?

[00:51:23.07]

Martha B.: Well, I think partly, I've already said that, was just it was just a way for them, the brothers. And plus, our grandchildren, especially Avery, his son, it was a time for them to see something that they'd never seen before. And whether or not they would be interested, ever interested in carrying it on, his nephew, Kyle, that was here was probably the most likely one that would want to try and keep the mill or try to keep it going. Just like his son. We've given, if they can come on the day we're making, they have the opportunity to feed the mill. Avery'll say, "I like the syrup hot." He likes it when it just comes right out of the spout, when it's still warm, he wants to lick it off the plate then. And in a time, we've always had people, "When are you gonna be making syrup? When are you gonna be making syrup?" Because many people remember, remember that. And

they want to see it done again. Like I told you early on, said, not many people do it anymore. Especially around here. Most people are in it in a very commercial, commercial way. Ours is just a little outfit back there that makes just a little bit of syrup. But I think just the art itself, there are many things like canning and freezing—canning more so than freezing—the younger generation, they just don't do that anymore. They may like sorghum syrup, but most people who grow one patch and they get it gathered and they get it made, that's all they want to do. [Laughter] They don't ever want to grow another one. Because it's so labor-intensive. It's a very, very hard thing to do.

[00:54:12.04]

Annemarie A.: That's what I'm learning. [Laughter]

[00:54:14.22]

Martha B.: Yeah.

[00:54:16.01]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you so much for talking.

[00:54:18.13]

Martha B.: Hopefully we've given you some information that is worthy of other people reading.

[Laughter]

[00:54:24.02]

Annemarie A.: I know you have.

[End of interview]