



**Michael Prince**  
**Sherwood, Tennessee**  
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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
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[00:00:00.00]

**Annemarie A.:** So, today is November 28, 2018. This is Annemarie Anderson, recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance and I'm in Sherwood, Tennessee. I am with Mr. Mike Prince. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Would you give us your full name and birthdate, please?

[00:00:21.06]

**Michael P.:** My name is Michael Lee Prince. I was born November 5, 1962.

[00:00:26.25]

**Annemarie A.:** Great. Mr. Prince, could you talk a little bit about where you born and raised? And what it was like?

[00:00:36.16]

**Michael P.:** Well, I was born about twenty minutes away from here at Sewanee, Tennessee, and I've lived my whole life here at Sherwood. I grew up in the-- which I think was a good time-- I grew up in the [19]60s, so there was still . . . I love history, so I grew up in a time where I could still meet people that was from the 1800s. I mean, grew up in the 1800s. I knew a man that, he could remember the Civil War. Soldiers and stuff coming through the valley. Only problem was, I was such a young kid that I should have took note of where they camped, where they were at, you know? But I've always loved history. I have a terrible memory, so I have to write stuff down a lot of times, but it was wonderful growing up here. The valley is . . . it's like living in a park. I mean, for a boy, I don't

know so much for a girl, but for a boy, it's paradise. You could hunt, you could fish, ramble through the mountains and explore the mountains. I had uncles that knew all the trees, plants, that taught me all about that. Like I said, it's just really hard to describe how wonderful it is to live in this valley. The people, people are some of the nicest people you will ever meet. My dad, he got me interested. I pick up Indian artifacts and Daddy got me started when I was three years old picking up arrowheads. My wife's been cleaning up around the house here, and she's laughed at how many arrowheads. She said, we finally got a box and started putting arrowheads in it, 'cause she said, "They're everywhere!" Said, "How many have you picked up?" Said, "Well, when you've been doing it for fifty-something years, you can acquire a lot of stuff. " But I just love the history of the valley. Like I said, growing up in the [19]60s there, I was able to talk to people that, they had stories that were told by their grandparents that, when they came into this valley in the 1800s, early 1800s and stuff, the Indians were still in the valley. And matter of fact, I'm related to the Indians that was in the area here. My family married into the Indians and everything. It's just wonderful to live here.

[00:03:37.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you tell me a little bit—well, first, what's this valley's name?

[00:03:43.24]

**Michael P.:** It's Sherwood. And it was originally named Kitchen Station. And that was on my mother's side of the family, that was her great-grandparents. Mr. Sherwood, he came through this valley during the Civil War, and he thought it would be a great place to come

back. I'm trying to remember this right. I think it was vineyards that he was wanting to plant in the valley here. They renamed it, then, after he came. 'Cause, just like I said, it was a little railroad station up there, is all it was. And they renamed it Sherwood. Like I said, it's . . . it's been here, I mean, mined the lime here for years through the [19]50s and everything. At one time, Sherwood in Franklin County, Tennessee here, they said the only way they could pay the teachers' salary for the year was when Gager Lime Company paid their taxes. It's odd to think, as big as our county is, that it didn't have no more industry than that. But the people, it was originally—'course, as most states and things were divided up, it was land grants. This whole valley was land grants. And this farm that I have here now, it was part of a five-thousand-acre land grant. They just sliced the valley up. People loved it; like I said, people love this valley. It was into the [19]50s before any land was sold to anybody outside this valley. Now, it was traded with people in the valley, and 'course, when someone grew up and got married, they gave them a piece of land and it was divided up like that, but it's amazing to think of how long it was that there wasn't any land—that says something about a place, how special it is when the land's traded in the valley. There's no outsiders could buy land and come into the valley.

[00:06:20.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's pretty neat. Now, you're talking about this place and how special it is. Me, being somebody who's from outside, who just comes in, I can see how special it is and how beautiful it is. Could you describe what your property, the property of your boyhood, looks like? And some of the things you did in the mountains and the valley around here?

[00:06:42.01]

**Michael P.:** Well, to describe the place, I'll go with what my wife says she thought was always impressive, is: behind the house here in this holler, there's seven waterfalls up through the mountains. They're not big, tall waterfalls, but they're still beautiful. When the water, if you go there in the wintertime—[Clock chimes] When they ice over—I need to turn that off?

[00:07:10.18]

**Annemarie A.:** It's okay.

[00:07:11.10]

**Michael P.:** When they ice over, I mean, they're beautiful. There's caves. We have limestone, so there's caves, you can always go to caves and explore. 'Course, being an arrowhead hunter, you're always looking under the bluffs and rocks and caves for arrowheads. The mountains are full of the timber, just your regular timber, oaks and walnuts. There was a lot of walnut trees in this holler that are very beautiful. But just the trees, the scenery. I mean, it just gets in your blood, that if I stay away from here, if I stay away from here, it makes me sad. It's just special. It's quiet, except for the train that comes down through the valley. That's the only really noise you get. Other than that, a jet plane flying over, it's quiet. You can go sit outside and it's peaceful; it's relaxing. It's really good therapy. My dad, he always took me in the mountains, and we walked all, all these mountains. It was just like a stroll in a park. He would take and show me different rock formations. There's a place here in the mountains from the house here, always thought it was kind of unique:

it's called Dark Holler. The sun actually only shines in it just for a couple hours during the day. The rest of the time, it's shaded. There's no direct sunlight except for, like I said, in the late afternoon. Just as a kid, everything, your eyes get real big with all this stuff they tell you. He would take and show me where, during the Civil War, they mined lead to make bullets. The one thing that I really—I've seen a few of 'em alive, but I've always imagined with the mountains here, Dad would tell me what they looked like, the American chestnut was here and how big the trees were. He would take me in the mountains and he'd show me the stumps and stuff of where those big trees were. To me, I always thought of it like the giant redwoods, those trees were so big. I'd have loved to have seen what the mountains look like when they were here. But it's just a wonderful place. It's just like I said; it's, Kim says, it's like a big park. It's like going to the Smokies, to a park, and it's all ours. Growing up, the people were so nice, that it's not like a lot of times now, is . . . lot of the people you met, even though they were not any blood kin to you whatsoever, they were called aunt and uncle. And you didn't have to worry about property lines. I mean, you could walk and nobody was gonna tell you, "Stay off my property." It was just like one big family in the valley. You could roam, and that's wonderful, to not have boundaries, to where you could run in the mountains all day long, that's what you did. I spent a lot of time in the mountains. I really didn't hunt that much. I deer hunted and squirrel hunted, turkey hunted, a little bit, but mostly never carried a weapon. Just hit the mountains. Didn't have to carry drinking water because you knew where all the springs were; you could go get a drink of water, good water, from springs, and it was just a wonderful time. I miss it very much since my dad's passed.

[00:11:38.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about him. What was his name, and tell me a little bit about who he was as a person.

[00:11:47.20]

**Michael P.:** He was Bill Mike Prince. The Princes are . . . we're kind of a jack of all trades. And Dad was the same way. He could do carpenter work, masonry work, mechanical work, and he loved to grow things. I guess that's one thing about my dad, was growing the vegetables and the flowers. It's hard for me to talk about him. I miss him very much.

[Break in recording]

[00:12:31.20]

**Annemarie A.:** All right, we're back. We're talking about your dad, Mr. Prince.

[00:12:36.20]

**Michael P.:** Yes. I was talking about Dad. When I think the most about him is growing his plants and flowers. He would have a huge garden. He worked all the time. He would work a regular job and he would come home in the evenings and he would go to his garden. He would grow stuff that he didn't even eat. He grew eggplants one time. None of us in the whole family liked eggplants, and Daddy—he tried to give eggplants to everybody. But he did, he just wanted to see if he could grow it, see if he could grow eggplants. We had a lot of some seeds, okra seeds and things that was handed down

through the family. He was most proud of that, 'cause the okra, he'd say, "That's Prince okra." Said, "That's what it's called; it's Prince okra. We've been growing it so long." And anybody had any of the old, open-pollinated varieties of seed, Dad would grow it. Lot of times . . . he would grow everything. He actually had a green thumb. They were talking about, one time a man from the state was here, and he was talking about the butternut walnuts were dying out in Tennessee. He was asking us, did we have some here? Daddy said, "Yes, they're on the hillsides here, but they're just a scrubby little tree. We never paid any attention that much to 'em, except for to get the nut off 'em." And Dad, that winter or that fall, I came in, he'd been on the hill and he'd gathered up white walnuts, butternut. By the next year, when the man come back from the state, Daddy asked him, said, "Did you have any luck finding any butternut walnuts?" He said, "No. We just can't seem to find 'em." Daddy said, "I got two hundred and fifty of 'em that's come up over there that I planted this spring." So, he gave—the state guy was amazed. He said, "You've got—?" You know, he couldn't believe how many he had. But Daddy, he ate a apple, he took the seed out, put it in a flower pot, and he got a apple tree. A peach. Anything. If he went and bought a cantaloupe, he'd save the seed and he would grow cantaloupes. He just loved—and even into his eighties, he still grew all those vegetables and all those flowers. We would laugh at him. He was short and he would be out there, he'd stay out so much and he didn't deliberately do it but he'd stay out so much, he'd be tan. He looked so much, we'd laugh at him with his little shorts on, little skinny legs out there working in the garden and everything. But he loved the growing, growing all the flowers. I've got tons of seeds that's in the freezer that I've got to get out and keep going to keep Daddy's flowers and stuff going. I don't want to lose them.

[00:16:02.11]

**Annemarie A.:** Definitely not. I mean, he sounds like he was a prolific seed-saver. Were there some specific varieties, I know you mentioned Prince's okra and we already talked about that, but were there some other varieties that were kind of just really grown in the valley that he saved and grew?

[00:16:23.19]

**Michael P.:** Well, yes. There was a corn, that there was an Indian corn, we called it, that was grown mostly in the valley that he used for feed. The variety, it was all different colors. It was rainbow-colored, I guess you would call it. I had those seed. It's sad to say this, we lost a pumpkin seed, that was their pumpkin they had grown here in this valley, and I've been trying to locate some more seed from it. But the pumpkin was so sweet, you could almost eat it like a cantaloupe. You could cut it, it was that good. We grew 'em, they were field pumpkins, and we grew 'em for feed. The cattle, boy, the cattle loved 'em. I can't remember exact reason one year and why we didn't keep more seed put back, but the seed crossed with something or something else, anyway, we lost those pumpkin seeds. I've been trying ever since then to get those pumpkin seeds back. I think I've got, might have one that's close, but it's still not that sweet pumpkin that we had. I know there's one called, and you can get it from Tennessee, it's grown in Tennessee, some of 'em call it the Tennessee sweet potato, but it's supposed to be a really sweet pumpkin. The variety we had was different from them. Matter of fact, I've got some of those pumpkins. But he

saved the old flowers. There's one called Needles & Thread. Of course, I think it's grown a lot of other places. Have you heard of it?

[00:18:24.03]

**Annemarie A.:** I haven't. What does it look like?

[00:18:25.17]

**Michael P.:** Okay. The Needles & Thread, it has a bloom on it that . . . that has a . . . almost like a sewing thread comes out of it. It's a real pretty little flower. Now, the only thing about it is, it looks just like marijuana. [Laughter] You have to watch if you're gonna plant it around your yards and stuff, because it's . . . it has, the leaf is identical to marijuana except it has four leaves on it and the marijuana has three. Daddy's laughed about that, because people would come. We had some people from California that came and visited, and they kept looking over at Daddy's flowerbed and Daddy finally told him, they said, "It's not what you think it is. It's an old flower called Needles & Thread and it does, if you count the leaves, it has one more leaf on it than a marijuana plant." Which, he always got a big kick out of that. Of course, Daddy was bad to never label his seeds, so I have all these seeds put back in the freezer that I'm just gonna have to grow to see what some of 'em are, because I don't know what they are. They're flowers and things. Why, 'course, my wife gets on me for never marking anything, but Dad didn't—he didn't mark it, so it's just one big present. I'm just gonna have to plant 'em and see what they do. But he loved keepin' the old varieties, and he could grow 'em. I'm not as good as him at the vegetable part. He could just grow, he just had a magic touch. He could grow it.

[00:20:31.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's really great. You were talking, too, about the importance of your aunts and uncles growing up. Could you talk a little about them, what their names were, and why they were so important to you?

[00:20:41.20]

**Michael P.:** Well, on my dad's side, he had nine brothers and sisters. And I was lucky enough to get to know all of 'em. He had one that died as an infant, just a few days old, and passed away. But I had four uncles and five aunts. They always said I was the—here at my grandparents', I stayed at my grandparents' all the time. My mother and dad just lived right next door here, but of all my cousins, I was kind of the youngest one. So, I was treated—plus, I was into everything, but my aunts and uncles, like I said, all my uncles were skilled in blacksmith. They were just like Dad. Anything they set their mind to, they could do. At an early age, I started learning as much as I could from them. They were, a lot of my other cousins, especially some of the older ways, the blacksmith, something as simple as killing hogs, none of my other cousins were interested in none of that. I was ready to learn and boy, they showed me everything they knew. But my uncles, they're always a good sense of humor. Princes always had a sense of humor. We were always gonna laugh, we're always gonna joke. And we're . . . they're all good-tempered, good-tempered. My aunts, wonderful cooks. Actually, my aunts and uncles I grew up with, they were like grandparents. I told somebody, one time, I said, "I have more grandparents than any other person's ever had." I said, "Because they love me and treated me just like a

grandparent." My uncles, they all stayed right here in the valley. They married and stayed here in the valley. My aunts, they married and most of 'em moved to Chattanooga, live in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Like I said, I had aunts that was—had one, I always think of her, she always made candy. She could make the best candy, divinity, and donuts, and homemade donuts. That's one thing about growing up when I did, everything was homemade. You didn't have very much stuff that was—and after you eat the homemade stuff, nothing from the store is any good. But my aunts and good cooks. I had one that stayed here on the farm, stayed here, never married; she stayed here, helped looking after my grandmother. I was with her all the time. She was just like a second mother. I followed her around and learned as much as I could from her. That's where I learned to cook from, from her. She was known in the valley here for the way she could cook. And 'course my dad, all of his brothers and sisters were, of course, older. My aunts and uncles on my mother's side, they were a lot younger than dad's brothers and sisters. They're wonderful, too. I kind of seem like I lean more towards my aunts and uncles from the Princes, but the ones from the Garner side, they're wonderful, too. They were always really good to me and friendly. Both sides; my aunts and uncles were. They're always happy, easygoing, friendly people. That's the best kind of person to be.

[00:25:10.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. Was your mom's family, were they from the valley, too? Where were they from, somewhere else?

[00:25:17.13]

**Michael P.:** They were from the valley here, too. My mother's family, for some strange reason, Garners and Princes traveled around together. It seemed like, wherever you find Princes, you find Garners right there, too. But my mother, her people were—the Garners, in her family, were some of the first settlers in the valley. They were here before my dad's people came in. And farmed, 'course, in that time period and everything. They farmed and logged, was her family background. Matter of fact, my great-great-grandfather, he was a blacksmith and a gunsmith. They always told that there's a cove up here in the mountains that's called Lost Cove. It's completely surrounded by mountains. There's three hundred and sixty-two acres sits down there. That's where my mother's family came and settled. They always told that they came and settled in that cove, and the Indians ran 'em out. The Indians were in there, and they ran 'em out. They said that his name is Henry, Henry Garner, and they said he went and started building rifles, making rifles. Said they came back to the cove then and, as sad as it sounds, they ran the Indians out of the cove and settled in there. But they settled in that cove because it was all big cane thickets, and to clear the land, all they had to do was burn and kill out the cane and it was ready to farm. They settled up there. Later on, the Princes came into that cove. Some of 'em settled in there. But the Garners, they were, like I said, the Garners and . . . they were the first, some of, like I said, some of the first settlers to come into the valley.

[00:27:47.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's interesting. Now, I kind of want to shift and talk a little bit about your family history with sorghum and how you grew up, the traditions that you grew up around with that.

[00:28:00.05]

**Michael P.:** Well, my family's been making sorghum, the Princes, their own record is being some of the first people in the country to grow and make sorghum. My grandfather and great-grandfather, they were the first here, probably some of the first ones in the valley here to start growing sorghum, making sorghum syrup. They had a reputation for making really good syrup, too, especially my grandfather and my uncles. They would make—it was a big thing, when it became sorghum-making time. The people in the valley, a lot of people didn't have the mill, and a lot of 'em didn't know how to cook it. They could grow it and everything else, so everybody would plant a little sorghum patch, and in the fall, it was non-stop for my grandfather making sorghum. They would make hundreds and hundreds of gallons of sorghum. Everybody would bring their little load of sorghum, no matter how big or how small, and shock it up around the mill. Grandpa would cook it off, and my uncles, and they would make the syrup up for a percentage of it. I would say probably, I don't know this for a fact, but my grandfather was such good-natured, I would say he probably made a lot of the sorghum and never charged anybody a dime or took any sorghum, because he had his own patches, too. Like I said, I don't know it for a fact, but I would say he probably just done it. He's a very kind man. But they would . . . it's kind of, we laugh, when it gets about around here, you plant your sorghum in the middle of May to late May. I know this far South, a lot of people can plant it a lot earlier, but in this valley, we've learned that you can get some bad rains and things in the spring and can get some floods in this valley. Usually, you have to wait till about May and you'll get a good sorghum crop. But in the spring, the year, my cousins, they laugh, you start thinking

about planting sorghum. When it gets fall of the year, you think about cooking it off. We laugh that it's in our blood. I had two cousins that wasn't gonna grow any, and it's like they're addicted to it. They have to grow a cane patch. I mean, they have to make sorghum. They said, undoubtedly, Grandpa and them, it worked into our bloodstreams; we got to do sorghum. But Grandpa, they would make it by the barrel, the wooden barrels. 'Course, back then, had to grind it with mules. It was all labor-intensive. But it would be, there would be people come—I can remember cooking dinner for, it wasn't just cooking dinner for a couple of people, you'd have forty, fifty, sixty people here for making sorghum. 'Course, a lot of 'em would bring some food, but a lot of times, my grandmother and aunt and them, they cooked for all those people. It was just like having a big county fair or something. Everybody showed up. They knowed when you was making, and that's one thing, living in the valley, some people—we've been making before and had some people drive up and say they can smell it. You know, that the breeze in the valley here was carrying the smell of it. We've laughed about that. But yeah, we've been making sorghum for a long time.

[00:32:35.08]

**Annemarie A.:** When you were a kid, did you help your granddad and uncles do that?

[00:32:40.29]

**Michael P.:** Yes. Probably, 'course, nowadays they'd think you was a little crazy, probably, for doing it, but as soon as I could walk and get around, they started you with stuff with sorghum. Mostly run around and got on their nerves and in the way, but eventually, you

moved up to stripping it with the paddles. 'Course we stripped it in the field standing up with the paddles, so you had to be a little older to do that. So, instead of that job starting out, they gave you a knife and let you cut the tops off. So, you're handing a four-year-old kid a razor-sharp knife to cut the tops off. You learn real quick not to get cut, and you get fast at it. But just as you move on, it's like graduating, moving to the next grade in school. You start out topping, and then you move to stripping it. Then you get to moving up to cutting it. You get a few more. And then different ones in the family kind of branch off to different things. Some of my cousins, they wanted to go no further than just cutting it and getting it out of the field. I had some, like my dad, he didn't care about being around the furnace cooking, but he loved to do the grinding. He loved to be at the mill and feed the mill and do the grinding. I was the only one that wanted to learn it all. I moved up, through the years, like I said, till I stood and watched it cooked and watched it cook till my uncle finally, he started letting me do the cooking. I never will forget that he was in his—he was about eighty years old, and we were cooking. He handed the paddles and everything over to me, and he said, "Now you're the sorghum maker." He said, "I'm retired. Too old." He said, "I can't teach anymore." And he said, "It's your job now." So, I'm the last one that knows the whole process. I've had to—I've tried to refine it a little more. The sorghum convention, going to it and talking to other people, I love to learn. I'm not so hard-headed. I'm gonna stick to something, if I can figure out something that works a little bit better or picks somebody's brain and learn to do a different way that helps me, that's a benefit to me, then I'm going to do it. So, I've refined the process a little bit from what the way Grandpa and them done it. But it hadn't changed—the quality of the syrup is just as good, if sometimes maybe a little bit better than what they did. 'Course

the old people, they went by signs and things like that. It's like sorghum-making, we had a barrel that always sit on the end of the pan where they put the juice in, and they would always stuff it full of the crushed cane and then put a burlap bag on top of it as a filter. I never, growing up as a kid, understood why they did that. Did it make sense to put cane in there? But it works as a filter. 'Course I don't do that anymore; I've learned to filter it a different way. So, I don't do that. But just . . . no mules anymore, everything's done with a . . . I've had to, for convenience, use a tractor. I'd still love to see it done with the pole and everything, and peoples asked me to do that. And I might one day. I might rig—I've got the mules to rig 'em up and might do one like that.

[00:37:06.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. You were mentioning some of the innovations, and that seems to be a theme, because sorghum-making is so labor-intensive. Could you talk or speak a little bit more directly to some of those, like you talked a little bit about filtering and some other stuff, some things that you've done to make it a little easier or to kind of hone the process down a little bit better?

[00:37:28.03]

**Michael P.:** Well, the thing with sorghum-making is, is . . . you want to produce the same quality syrup every year. And if you don't, you know, like I was talking about how my grand-uncle and grandfather and them made sorghum. If you ask 'em a question about it, it's like, "Well, that's how we've always done it." Sometimes, that's great. The tradition and stuff. But I've always asked, "Why? Why do you do this, why do you do different

things?" If you can find out the answer of why that works, it's same as letting the juice settle for a while. It increases the starches and the sugar in it, which is gonna make you a sweeter syrup. But the whole thing about all these processes is trying to get to where the consistency of the syrup is the same. If somebody gets a jar of syrup from you this year, you want to be able to give 'em, the next year when they come back, to give 'em the same quality of syrup. And that's all it is to it. With me, it doesn't matter if I make five gallon or a thousand gallon. It has to taste good. If it doesn't taste good, I've had years that I've took sorghum that I've made that I've—it was good sorghum, but it didn't meet my standards. And it was used for something else. I mean, matter of fact, I've even dumped sorghum before because it didn't—you can use it in feed, mix it in the feed, make sweet feed and things like that, but to me, you want to produce . . . everything you're producing has got your name on it. And for me and to honor my ancestors that's made it, I want to do the best that I can do, and turn out the best quality. Like I said, meeting other people that they do the process maybe a little different, and then it's what works for an individual. Every sorghum maker makes a little bit different sorghum technique that they use. Doesn't mean that mine's better than theirs or theirs is better than mine, it's just what we grew up with and what works for us. But the process of filtering the juice more and anything that can improve the quality, I'm ready to do that. And another thing too is, you're getting the process down to where it's not being so much labor in it. It opens the possibility for people to, new people to get into it and do it. Nothing wrong with hard work, but if you can do something to make this process where it's not so labor-intensive that there may be younger people—'cause I've got a lot of people that have watched me make sorghum, cook it in the pan and everything, and they say, "I want to do this." I say,

"Well, come back when we're working in the field and when we're cutting and when we're processing it. If you can handle that part of it, then . . ." And a lot of 'em come and see how much labor is involved and how much hard work, and then it's not exactly as fun as they think it is. If you can get things that help the process, and it's with anything, it's with any of the old ways of doing things. If you can do stuff to make it a little easier and more streamlined processes, then you can teach it to other people. And they'll be a little more willing to learn and do it. That's the way I've always looked at it. There's a lot of people now that's wanting to learn all that ways of doing a lot of the older stuff. It needs to be, the process needs to be wrote down and worked out to where it's easier for people to do it. I'm not saying people's lazier now, but it's still anything you can do and simplify it, more peoples' gonna be interested in it.

[00:42:55.15]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense. I kind of have two questions. The first one, you were kind of mentioning, you have a standard you want your syrup to be. What are those standards like? What's, for you, the optimum syrup that you can make?

[00:43:08.05]

**Michael P.:** To me, it all goes about flavor. It's the taste. To me, sometimes I kind of laugh at people a little bit; to me, it's a little bit ridiculous. Now, I'm talking about my standards and stuff. One year, I made some syrup—and some years, it will do this. In a wet year, the weather . . . has a real big impact on what your syrup is gonna do. In my experience. Scientifically, that may not be true, but my experience is, if you have a wet year, the

syrup seems to be a little darker. One of the problems with people today is, we get a picture in our head of what something looks like or should look like, and if it isn't like that, then we think it's bad. I had syrup that year that was a little dark, and I had a friend that bought syrup from me every year. I took him some, and a man seen it and said, "Oh, that's too dark; that's not gonna be good syrup." Never tasted it, never had a taste of it. My friend told him, said, "Well, it may be dark, but it's some of the best-tasting sorghum I ever had." And that's it; taste, look. That's the number-one, like I said, I'd rather make five gallon of really good-tasting syrup than a hundred gallon of syrup that was maybe still tasted okay, but it's the flavor. You've got to have the flavor. And you want that every year, you want to strive to do that every single time. Like I said a while ago, the number one thing is for my ancestors, my grandfather and my uncles, it was: I want to do that for them. Like I said, my name's kind of stamped on it. You want that. That's what people, any of the people that's wanting to get into any of the stuff as simple as growing vegetables and things like that is, Mother Nature's not perfect. So, when you grow that tomato, you don't need to throw it away or disappointed because it's not the shape or color that you think it should be. Now, you can work hard to get it to what you want it to be, but you've got to accept what Mother Nature gives you. You've just got to make the best of it, with it. And that's the way I look at it.

[00:46:06.21]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, definitely. My other question is, you're kinda mentioning—this is kinda backtracking something you said earlier—you're talking about you, out of all the cousins, were the only one to really want to learn the entire process. What were your motivations

for that? Why did that interest you so much, and why was that something you wanted to carry on?

[00:46:31.13]

**Michael P.:** Hmm, that's a tough question. I'll go back to something that my mother told me one time. She come in and hugged me and patted me on the back and, just out of the blue, said this right here, said, "You were born in the wrong time." She said, "You should've been born in the 1800s." She said, "I'm sorry that you were born now in this time period. You're not suited for this time period." But I just like all this stuff. I just want to live simple. Not complicated. And learning these old ways, to me, it was just fun. It was just fun to learn how to do all this stuff. Butchering hogs. It's hard work. I just want to learn to do it.

[00:47:29.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. It's really special that you're able to carry on all of these things.

[00:47:35.17]

**Michael P.:** Yes. It's wonderful . . . to have all these experiences, but it's sad that . . . out of the nieces and nephews, that there's really not anybody that's interested in doing it. I don't want 'em to do—I'm not expecting 'em to do every single thing, but it's just sad to see of what . . . and it's throughout the country and everything, the knowledge that's just sitting there that could be used. I'm no genius, I'm by no means or anything like that, but you like to see these things handed down that somebody would take 'em and use 'em. I've

always said that every old person is a library of information that's untapped, nobody, very few people use all that life experiences and stuff that could really benefit 'em. That's, with me, I just wish that I could teach. That anybody that wanted to learn. But when you want to hand—I'm real big on family history, I'm real big on passing things down and everything. I wish that some of 'em would learn it. The sorghum making, I have one nephew that's a little bit interested in it, but I don't know that he will ever take on and do it. But it's just, I just believe in passing all this stuff down. I think, in every family, that's important in the family, of passing stuff down. I just don't think it's taught that much anymore, that I was raised that you didn't do things and that I guess your family honor. You didn't want to do anything that was going to embarrass your ancestors. I mean, you wanted to always strive to do good and everything to make your ancestors proud. And I think we kind of lost that a little bit. I don't think we teach that that much anymore. I hope I didn't ramble around; I hope I answered your question.

[00:50:25.05]

**Annemarie A.:** No, that was fantastic. Thank you. Let's talk a little bit about now and all of this—I mean, obviously this is really important to you. So, could you talk a little bit about the process? I think let's start with just the plant itself, sorghum, as a crop. And I know it can be temperamental with its kind of relationship to the soil and to rain and all this other stuff. Could you talk a little bit about maybe the seed varieties you use and how you grow and cultivate that crop?

[00:51:04.21]

**Michael P.:** Okay. The seed that I grew for a long time was the variety, it was Sugar Drip. I think that was the name of it, because the seed, it had kind of been handed down to different ones through the valley and everything. I think that's what the variety was. Now, the old, old variety that they grew years ago was Honey Drip. And the Sugar Drip's just an improved variety of that. But what I grow, a new variety, it's . . . 1810. It's just been out a couple of years. What I always liked to do was, was get a seed, and I like a seed where you can keep your seed over. 'Course, most of it is open-pollinated. I'm a believer that if you keep growing a seed in an area, it gets adjusted to your climate, your soils, everything. And right now, that's what I'm doing with the 1810. I'm replanting and growing it to get it established for here in the valley. But like I said, we usually start planting it in the middle of May. I have pushed it on into July, first of July, planting sorghum. It just pushes it late in the fall, and when you do that, you have to worry about a frost. That will get your sorghum. The frost will. You need to try to get it out. In my family, we liked it to—we liked our sorghum coming in to where it's ready to cook off in October. September here can be hot. And that's the last thing you want to be, is trying to work in a sorghum field. We've had it go into a hundred degrees trying to work in the sorghum. And to stand around a furnace and cook it is . . . is misery. But we plant it in, like I say, about the middle of May. Of course, everybody that grows sorghum knows, it seems like it's never gonna come up. When it does come up, it's so tiny that—'course, with me, I'm worried to death if I got a good enough crop, how's it gonna look? Because it stays so small. But usually, I'll cultivate it about three times for weed control. That's one thing about sorghum, it takes it forever to come up, but boy, when it comes out of the ground, it grows fast. So sometimes, just getting to cultivate it twice is all we can

manage. Then that's just pretty much keeping an eye on it till the fall of the year. A new problem that we've got now is the sugarcane aphids, and that's a really bad problem for the sorghum producers. It puts added pressure on a person like me because I do not like using the sprays and the chemicals. Even though the sprays they use is pretty much harmless, it's still . . . I just like keeping things more natural. But if the sugarcane aphids leave us alone, then about the last of September, first of October, I usually—we always went to check the sugar content and everything on it, but I like to let the fodder start drying on mine. You know, the bottom, when it starts drying on a stalk. You may not make as much syrup, but I do think the quality of the syrup is better. Like I say, can I prove that with science? No. But just from experience, I like letting the cane really get ripe. And then the process of cutting it, if the cane is good and straight and hadn't had bad lodging in the field, I use a corn binder to cut the cane. That speeds the process up ten times over, having to go in and cut it with a machete by hand. Then it's taken to the mill, and usually we try it, we like to process it, get it processed. I don't like to let the cane, if you stock it up, you can't let it stand for up to two weeks before you start processing. But usually, we're such a small operation, we usually know by the wagon how much cane to put on it for what we call a day's cooking. We just do that. And it's now, it's pretty much me and my wife, Kim. Working in it. So, we usually cut during the week, strip, and we hand-strip ours. We clean the cane, I like the cane clean. A lot of them stick the cane at the fodder drying and run it through the mill. Either way, it's fine. I've done it both. I've tried it with letting the fodder dry and run it through there. I get the same quality syrup. The only difference I've found out is, it seems like the mill processes the cane better when it's stripped. I've noticed that if you leave the fodder on there, as the fodder crushes

and goes through the mill, a lot of times, a lot of juice will run out, go out with the fodder. If you kind of think about it, too, if you took a dry towel and ran it through the mill and poured water on it, you're gonna get a wet or a damp towel when it comes out the other side of the mill, no matter how tight you've got the mill set. That's kind of what I've noticed with the fodder. I think you lose a little bit of the juice. Now, over a period of time, how much does that amount to? It may not make that much of a difference, but in the mill, seems like you're having to clean your mill out, the fodder's breaking and stopping up the mill, so, to me, we've got pretty fast at stripping it. So, we can hand-strip it, and it's good, clean cane. And it looks good. A neat process always look better than a messy one. But we run it through there, and then we've got the evaporator pan that's—we got nine sections in it. Now, ours are—evaporator pans, continuous flow is what they're called—but we've always done ours a little bit different. My pans are made to where I can stop the flow anywhere I want to in the pan. And then what we call the finishing pan, we have to dip the syrup over into it or the juice into it to cook at the final stage. We always did that because you can control the consistency of the syrup better. Continuous flow is great. If you've got steam and everything's set up right, and the flow going into the pan's set up right, you can—that's the reason they were designed to work like that. But we found that we like the . . . we cook out where Mother Nature, the wind and things, so wind blowing across your pan could cool it down in a second. So, we like the separate section to dip over into and I can take it. And a lot of people's different. Now, somebody that does large-quantity can't do this, but a small operation—I have people that buy sorghum from me that some of them like it thin like a pancake syrup. Some of 'em want it thick. Well, I can cook off batches to suit what the people that get syrup from me like. So,

by doing it that way, I can hold it in that finishing pan and thicken it up. You know? That just works for me. That's always worked best for me, and that's how my family, that's how we were taught to do it. That's pretty much the process. I filter it from the mill. When it comes out of the mill, it's filtered. I filter it as it comes out of the holding tanks. It's filtered again when it comes off—it's filtered again when it goes through a screen filter, and then it goes through a cloth filter, to make sure there's no impurities that makes it into the syrup. We try to, I've got to where in the old days, they'd let it sit and cool off really good before they ever dipped it up and balled it. I like pouring mine up now while it's still warm. The temperature comes down to where it's put in the jars, and that's when I bottle it. Besides eating it, that's the end of the process for it.

[01:01:39.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[01:01:39.18]

**Michael P.:** It's just a lot of hard work, but it's a lotta fun, too. But that's pretty much the process we go through.

[01:01:51.02]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. what's your favorite way to eat it? Or what are some of your favorite ways? [Laughter]

[01:02:01.07]

**Michael P.:** Well, I like sorghum. I've always liked it more cooked in the food than actually just eating sorghum. Now, as a kid, I don't do it now, but as a kid, I ate a ton of it with just butter and sorghum. And stir it up and eat it with cornbread or a biscuit. But now, I kind of watch the sweets a little bit, and I enjoy it in food. I have an old gingerbread cake, I guess probably the old people would call it a sorghum cake. I make that. And it stays, it's just so moist. And the sorghum adds just the right flavor to it. You can use other syrup and make, but the sorghum keeps it moist, and the flavor, I like it in cookies. Like I say, you can use the sorghum, and it's not an overbearing sweet. If you don't like a lot of sweet in cooking, like cookies and that, it's really good for that. And one of the best ways is, is to bake a sweet potato and put butter on it and drizzle sorghum on it. That, I guess probably if I had to pick one of my favorite things with sorghum, that's it. I love it on a baked sweet potato.

[01:03:29.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That sounds really good.

[01:03:30.09]

**Michael P.:** But now, my dad and everybody, they would eat it, they liked it—like I say—with butter. Stir it up with butter and put it on a biscuit.

[01:03:47.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. This is kind of clarifying, but what kind of mill do you have, and is your pan made out of copper or stainless steel?

[01:03:57.21]

**Michael P.:** I've got—my pan is just a sheet metal pan. We had copper, we've used copper before. It's hard to find a good grade of copper to make a pan out of. There's a lot of alloy metal out there now, and you have to watch that. Stainless-steel, I've got a stainless-steel pan that I've got to finish—I've started building it, and now I've got to finish it. That's what I want to go to, is all stainless steel. And the mill is an old No. 13 Chattanooga plow that belonged to my grandfather. And it's just about completely worn out. I've got another mill to take its place, a John Deere horizontal mill that runs off of power takeoff, and that's gonna be the, that's going to save us a tremendous amount of time with it. 'Cause it will grind and process a lot more cane. But like I said, the mill, I've been using my whole life. It's the one my grandfather used, and the mill, like I said, it's just about—I stay nervous every time I use it now, because I'm afraid it's going to break. And I'm wanting to retire it. I'm wanting to retire that mill. It's served its purpose. I want to clean it up and display it some way and actually, I'd like to someday donate the old—find a nice historical society or somewhere here around close that I could donate the pan and the mill, too, to be just put on display. I would like to do that.

[01:06:00.09]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Let me see. Anything else . . . I think that I only have one more question to ask you, and that's, why is making sorghum—well, I have two. Let me start with this one. What's the community, you're talking about people come and sometimes

when they smell you making the sorghum, how does the community feel about you still making this?

[01:06:29.27]

**Michael P.:** Oh, they love it. The people in the area, matter of fact, people start calling—a lot of years, and asking, "When are you going to be making? We want to come." And it's fun. I get a lot of enjoyment out of the—the older people can act like kids when they're around it, especially when they're sampling it. But watch the kids, 'cause they're just fun as can be, to watch them. How much they enjoy tasting the sorghum or eating the sorghum. And them getting to see the process. We usually, hopefully, it's a beautiful, sunny fall day when they come out, and the atmosphere is just—it's not like work at all. It's very enjoyable to see. And that's what . . . none of the stuff that I do, as far as the sorghum-making and stuff, is for a big money maker or anything like that. I probably give away more sorghum than I sell. Especially now that I'm older and stuff and I can't produce what I did years ago. It's more important, like I said, as a gift to people. And when they come out. But yeah, the atmosphere, it's just wonderful to see a little kid eating the sorghum. I will cut cane, pieces of cane, into short lengths where they can dip dipping sticks. I guess you call it. And to watch 'em. One lady, one year, she had a—how old was that baby? It wasn't . . . was it a year old, probably about a year old?

[01:08:32.26]

**Kim Prince:** Probably.

[01:08:34.10]

**Michael P.:** Maybe two years old. And it was so funny, because she was carrying it, and dipped into the sorghum and gave it a little taste, and then she was standing there talking and she had cane up, moving it back and forth, and the baby was following it with its mouth, trying to get that cane. That's probably a memory that will always stick with me, is that little kid trying to get to that. And then they had another, I think it's an older sister, you know, didn't like the syrup. Taste it, and "Oh, I don't like it." But that baby trying to get to that sorghum on that stick. And people, I had a great aunt that would show up every year, and she didn't like the little—we always just cut the cane, is what they made the little dipping out of. She would show up every year and get out of the car, and as soon as she got out of the car, she's using her—well, she was close to ninety then—she'd get out of the car, and first thing hold up, she had a great, big wooden spoon. She'd wave her wooden spoon, "I've got my tasting stick with me. I brought it with me." And that's the fun part of it. There's still one thing I want to do when I make sorghum, and my uncle did this. I never got to see him do it. He done it years ago when he was younger, just a boy. But they would keep, have a late corn patch, a lot of times. They would have roasting ears at about sorghum-making time. And about the last cooking of the day, he would throw, go pick corn and throw it over in the syrup and boil the corn in the cob on the syrup and then take it out and eat it. So, I've always wanted to do that. I don't know why I didn't just put some on the stove and done that, but I want to do it with the—I've seen him do it with apples, making molasses, and they would throw apples in the syrup, the last cooking. But mostly, it's just to see the enjoyment that the people get from coming out to

the place here. Like I said, I want everybody else to enjoy what I got to enjoy here. If they can do it for a few hours, then I'm happy.

[01:11:08.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. My last question is, why is it important to you? Why is sorghum-making so important to you? I think you kind of answered that.

[01:11:16.00]

**Michael P.:** It's just a way to . . . it's a way to honor my ancestors. You know? That's it. I mean, I love to make it. It's kind of—like I said, it's kind of in our blood. I've had a year that was bad and I'd say, "I'm not growing any next year. I'm not fooling with this." Next year, I'm planting it. It's most, like I say, most one of the big things is, it's a tradition. The Princes have always done sorghum. It's not a burden that, "Well, we've always done it, so I've got to do it." No. You do it for the love of your ancestors and your family that's passed.

[01:12:13.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Thank you so much. Is there anything you want to add that we haven't talked about?

[01:12:18.14]

**Michael P.:** Ah . . . I think I've talked enough. [Laughter] I've talked quite a bit, but I've enjoyed talking and telling you about it. It's nice to know there's gonna be a record of it.

[Laughter]

[01:12:34.04]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, thank you.

[*End of interview*]