

Interview of: William Meacham
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interview Date: August 23, 2005

August 25, 2005

Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interviewee: William Meacham
Mr. Meacham's home – Meacham Farm – Sturgis, KY
August 22, 2005

[Begin William Meacham]

0:00:00.5

William Meacham: That means I'll have to think a little bit here. *[Laughs]*

0:00:04.6

Rodman Meacham: Well you can take your time.

0:00:05.9

WM: It must have been over 60 years ago.

0:00:08.1

RM: Yeah; but you can remember that stuff better than you can remember yesterday.

0:00:13.3

WM: *[Laughs]*

0:00:16.6

Amy Evans: Well Mr. Meacham, could I get you to say your name and your birthday for the record here?

0:00:21.2

WM: William Meacham--birthday is September the--

0:00:32.3

Rodman Meacham: September 9th, isn't it?

0:00:33.6

WM: September 9, 1913.

0:00:37.5

AE: And you started this business in the '60s here--this ham house?

0:00:43.7

WM: This house--this little--this first part of it out there was built in the '50s. And back when I was just a boy my grandfather and my mother's father owned the farm and he had a--had a pretty good bunch that—well--

0:01:27.3

RM: Farm hands.

0:01:27.8

WM: Farm hands I guess you'd call it, yeah--and he'd give them so much as meat hogs if they stayed the year and then they hired--they hired by the year; a lot of times somebody else wanted to help a little bit, so then they'd come hire you--hire the man away from you. And he told them if they would stay the year he'd--he'd give them so much--so much--two meat hogs for--for part of the labor. Of course, he furnished them a house and all that good stuff with it. And so he
[Laughs]--I kind of get stuck--you got a pause on that thing? [Laughs]

0:02:30.1

AE: I sure do.

0:02:31.0

WM: Huh?

0:02:31.6

AE: I sure do.

0:02:35.5

WM: Even before I got into high school, they--they'd kill eight or ten hogs. It was just before Christmas and--because there was--there was about four or five tenants on the farm that wanted some Christmas--Christmas food to eat and--and that's the way it started and--

0:03:10.6

AE: Can you talk about what that was like--hog killing time when you would process all of that meat?

0:03:17.3

WM: We'd go out into the hog lot and feed lot and pick out a hog that was around 200 to 300 pounds and bring them up there and--and had a pen fixed up where they'd shoot one hog and take it on into the flesh area to scald him and hang him up in a little house there out at night and let the--the carcasses chill out good and then they'd cut them out the next morning and I was kind

of playing around and getting--getting--I guess getting in more--in the way more than anything else, and when they got the--the hams all cut out and the shoulders and the bacon--the slabs... bacon is not bacon until it's cured, so they--let's see; the what you call it--bellies is--is--they were cured and I'd go in and tell my grandmother, she had an old cookbook in the house that had the recipe that the family had used for years and so I went--she was--one winter there she wasn't feeling too good and she pitched the book to me and said here you can do as good as I can. And that kind of started it; **[Laughs]** and so every--every year we'd kill the hog for our own use and then for the men there on the farm--families. Most of them--good many of them were colored and they wanted the bones and the lard and the--what we didn't particularly want, and then along in the '30s my father got into the hybrid seed corn business and he was--drove to different meetings and all and he'd always carry a country ham in his car. And friends and all that and sometimes he'd give the ham out to some and kind of scattered it out and he got in touch there with the Dr. Beason at the University of Illinois and got some of the--his early seed stocks for the seed corn program and--I'm getting into the corn program.

0:06:31.2

RM: Yeah; you stay on the ham, okay. **[Laughs]**

0:06:33.7

WM: Stay on the ham--But so the--every year we'd have about--just before Christmas we'd kill eight to ten hogs and then after Christmas during that cold weather we'd--we'd kill a few more and--and we'd cure--cure up those hams.

0:07:02.1

AE: Did y'all also put up hogs head cheese and that kind of thing?

0:07:06.7

WM: Did what?

0:07:07.5

AE: Did y'all put up hogshead cheese and that kind of thing? Souse or--

0:07:13.3

WM: No, no; we--we grounded sausage and my mother would fry the sausage about two-thirds done and then put it in a gallon crock jar and seal it over and set it out in the ham--out in the old ham house there and when we--we wanted some--some sausage for breakfast we'd go outside and get it. *[Laughs]*

0:07:54.8

RM: That was health food, wasn't it?

0:07:57.7

AE: I'm telling you. [*Laughs*]

0:07:58.7

WM: Yeah.

0:07:58.2

AE: Did you have a favorite part of the hog that you looked forward to at hog killing time?

0:08:06.0

WM: I guess ham and maybe--I always liked the hot cracklings and we had--we had a colored fellow there that my grandfather had taken as a little orphan boy and raised him out on the farm and--and my grandmother had taught him to render the lard and how to grind the sausage and all and his name was Jergen and when Jergen--when we got into the hog killing, Mr. Jergen was the

boss. And everybody had to do what Jergen said to do. *[Laughs]* And he was--he was good at it.
And it--I'm kind of--kind of lost.

0:09:08.0

AE: Well when you grew up killing hogs and curing hams and all what made you want to make a business of it?

0:09:16.3

WM: Well let's see--

0:09:27.4

RM: George.

0:09:27.5

WM: Huh?

0:09:27.9

RM: George got you into it didn't he?

0:09:31.4

WM: Yeah; well I--I married and my wife's brother lived in Louisville and they really loved country hams and when George got a hold of some of this I--he ordered hams and George's father also likes it. And he just--we shipped those hams out oh [*Laughs*]--I'm all messed up here.

0:10:15.1

RM: You'd--George would have the party and--and he'd give a ham to a friend and they--and then the next thing you know you were curing hams for them, right?

0:10:23.7

WM: Yeah; and my--my father then got into the hybrid seed corn business and he'd go places and he'd put two or three hams in the back of the car and some of his friends up there in--in-laws and the University of Kentucky and all around with it were beginning to go to the hybrid seed corn and he'd give them a ham and sometimes they'd give--he'd come back home with a few greens and his seed corn--I'm all messed up here.

0:11:20.6

RM: Why don't you give him just a break for just a minute?

0:11:22.4

AE: Okay; sure.

0:11:24.9

RM: After George got you started up there you did--

0:11:27.5

WM: George's mother.

0:11:28.0

RM: --you used to buy hams and cure them didn't you?

0:11:31.1

WM: Yeah; George's mother--George--yeah, George's mother--I'll get it right; now George was my--brother to my wife and they had good friends around and--and in different parts of Kentucky, and I remember one Thanksgiving we were eating din--supper and the phone rang and it was a good friend of my wife's and called and said he had--was going to have a good many in

for Thanksgiving dinner and wanted to know if I could send him some hams--and I shipped her some. I think to Mayfield. And then she had a sister that lived up in the central part of the state and it just--it grew by word of mouth. **[Laughs]**

0:12:43.1

AE: And the rest is history, huh?

0:12:45.7

WM: Uh-huh.

0:12:46.0

AE: Did you think that your grandmother's curing recipe would have this much staying power?

0:12:54.3

WM: Well when you get something good it'll stay there. But it--it was one of the old--old recipes. It had some salt into it. Later on in our ham business we had to kind of trim the salt to satisfy the salt-free people that didn't want so much salt on it, but we had--you had to leave enough to--to get a good cure on it. So that's about the--what can I do? **[Laughs]**

0:13:45.3

AE: What do you think about your son carrying on the business?

0:13:50.7

WM: Well I started it in '20--well I--I moved down on this--this farm in '48 and that's when I really got into the commercial end of it. Up on the other farm, I just had the regular old ham house that had been there for years and I was kind of limited--a few--50, 60, 100 hams was about the limit and then I--I built this--the first part of this ham house down here then and started in--in groups of 50 and just gradually worked it up and Rodman got through school and through the University on--you took a meats program didn't you?

0:14:58.8

RM: Uh-huh.

0:15:01.1

WM: And he showed an interest in it--interest in it and so he's--the day has come when I just can't do anything anymore. I'll be 92 years in the first of September and so he's--he's kind of taken over of it.

0:15:34.4

AE: Well you should be proud.

0:15:36.6

WM: Yes'um; I am. [*Laughs*]

0:15:38.4

AE: You have your name on an awful lot of hams and bacon out there.

0:15:40.8

WM: We've sold a lot of hams over this country and Christmas time you wouldn't believe it.

[*Laughs*]

0:15:48.9

AE: Well congratulations to you; it's a great business to maintain.

0:15:53.8

WM: Yeah.

0:15:58.6

AE: Well I can't think of anything else. You want to--you want to add something to the end?

0:16:04.2

WM: Well let's see; I don't know. You got anything to say Rodman? I might--

0:16:08.8

RM: Well she's already got about an hour's worth of my rambling out there.

0:16:11.8

WM: Checking on me, huh?

0:16:13.3

RM: No, not that long.

0:16:15.2

WM: Oh is she; well...

0:16:18.0

RM: I told her that the man was up here still sitting up there waiting so I--she wanted to meet you.

0:16:25.6

WM: Yeah; well I'm glad you come in.

0:16:26.8

AE: Yeah; well I sure am glad I got to visit with you.

0:16:31.5

WM: I've got a kind of peculiar ailment here on it. Top of this hip bone is--is what they call a concussion on it.

0:16:51.4

RM: You don't think it's from eating too much ham do you?

0:16:53.1

WM: Yeah.

0:16:53.6

AE: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

0:16:56.4

WM: Some way or other it--the blood supply got cut off from the socket, the ball, and when it did it softened up and sent me--every time I sit down or something it starts to press it out and so instead of being club shaped it's flat. And it's pushing against this side--

0:17:19.1

RM: What's this got to do with hams, Dad?

0:17:22.5

WM: Sciatic nerve. I'm just telling what--what my ailment here is on--it's--it's inoperable. The--
the thing just wouldn't do anything to it.

0:17:37.3

RM: You know what; he always told me that was fair, wear, tear.

0:17:40.5

WM: Yeah, yeah.

0:17:43.5

AE: Well thank you, sir, for letting me visit with you. I do appreciate it.

0:17:46.9

WM: Thank you—and--

0:17:46.9

[End William Meacham]