

Heather Libby:

Okay, we're recording. So today... Hi, I am Heather Libby. I am the adult service's librarian at the Knoxville Public Library, and I am here with, would you share your name?

Sandra Agan:

My name's Sandra Agan. I'm here with my husband Fred.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Sandra, are you able to tell us your birth year?

Sandra Agan:

1940.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Can you tell us about where the memories you'll be sharing with us today, where they're from?

Sandra Agan:

I'm currently living on a century plus farm. One that was purchased by my great-grandparents in 1905. We're living in the same house that was my great-grandparents' at that time. And my husband and I have been actively farming that farm now for 55 years.

Heather Libby:

So we have a lot of history to potentially discuss. That's wonderful. So you've told us about how old your family century farm is. Can you tell us a little bit more about how your family came to this farm in Iowa, if you know that history?

Sandra Agan:

My great-grandparents had owned a farm about a half a mile to the west of the current farm I'm living on. And when their granddaughter... I'm sorry, when their daughter became of marriage age, he gave that farm to the granddaughter, to my grandmother... I'm sorry, I keep getting this confused.

Heather Libby:

It's all right. It's a lot to keep straight.

Sandra Agan:

And when she married they bought the house, the farm that I live in and my grandmother then with her husband moved into that house.

Heather Libby:

Okay. All right. And so you shared with us that you grew up on this farm, is that correct?

Sandra Agan:

That is correct.

Heather Libby:

So can you tell me a little bit about your family, who you lived on the farm with? Was it you and siblings?

Sandra Agan:

My husband and I moved there as a married couple. We had three small children at the time, and all three children of course grew up in that home. And now we have grandchildren and we have great-grandchildren. So now we're talking of the seventh generation that have lived in that, not only lived but spent time in that home and on that farm.

Heather Libby:

So looking back, do you have a favorite story about growing up on the farm?

Sandra Agan:

No, not really. It was a typical farm life. We of course had chickens. We had eggs, we had beef, processed their own food. I don't know that I was an integral part of all of it because as I grew to adulthood, married, and then we were not living on that exact farm for a period of time.

My father passed away at a very young age, and so when he passed, my mother asked my husband and I, Fred, to move to the farm and do the farming. So we actually then moved back to the house, and that was 55 years ago.

Heather Libby:

Fred, did you have experience with farming before?

Fred Agan:

I grew up on a farm.

Heather Libby:

You grew up on a farm too, also in Iowa?

Fred Agan:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay.

Sandra Agan:

We were both born into farming. We both came from farming families.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Sandra Agan:

Again, generations prior to that were farmers.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So you told me a little bit about the crops that your family grew. Is there anything more you'd like to add to that or has it changed over the years perhaps what you guys, what you've grown on the farm?

Fred Agan:

Well we'd still raise corn and soybeans. The farm is rented out now to neighbors. But it's the same city. I spent a lot of time with Sandy's dad when we were first married, and felt like he'd been another father to me. And a lot of good memories of him. Showed me a lot of good things on how to do things and some of them carried over when we took over on the farm.

Heather Libby:

Oh, that's wonderful.

Sandra Agan:

We see that in today's society most farmers are primarily crop ground. Our renters still have the livestock as well. So that is how our farm is set up, is for multi, not only livestock but also crop and not many farms are still that way in today's society. They concentrate on the crops only. So they don't have the barns and such for the land animals.

Heather Libby:

So what livestock are being raised on the farm now?

Fred Agan:

Right now, beef cows. Beef cattle.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Sandra Agan:

Sheep.

Fred Agan:

Sheep. Some sheep.

Sandra Agan:

No more hogs. We had a lot of hogs when we were younger, and when it was very typical of the Iowa farm back in our generation. That's how farmers bought their farm because the hogs... You could turn your money quicker with hogs because they had babies more often.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay. Yeah, the shorter gestation, right?

Sandra Agan:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

So why the move away from hogs?

Fred Agan:

I got tired of them more. They take a lot of work and I just was tired of it.

Sandra Agan:

And we have now the housing, the big corporate farms that do the hogs. They have the big, confinements is what I'm trying to say.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Fred Agan:

We didn't want to go that way.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, right. Okay. So growing up, did you raise any of your own food?

Sandra Agan:

Most of it. We had chickens, which we not only had for broilers but they had eggs, and of course that was a part of the income, was the income from the eggs.

And then we had of course beef, which you always saved one out to butcher, and then you always had your own hogs. And of course we dressed chickens. We had lots of chicken, especially in the summertime. That was a typical summer meal was fried chicken because that was very easy to have. Of course, you had to do your own processing and cooking.

Heather Libby:

Were you involved with that? I've heard some stories. Yes?

Sandra Agan:

Yes. Dressing chickens.

Heather Libby:

You mean not your favorite? What about gardening?

Sandra Agan:

Yeah, we all had that and my parents were somewhat unique in that they had a home freezer early on. Prior to that people didn't have that ability at home. So you rented a space at the locker, they would have a certain area that you rented and you could keep your frozen products in that.

Heather Libby:

I didn't know that. That's fascinating.

Sandra Agan:

My parents got a freezer early on, and so we were able to freeze a lot of our food.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Sandra Agan:

Canned as well. Some of the things you didn't freeze, you canned, but we had all kinds of produce out of the garden and, of course, our meat that we kept in the freezer.

Heather Libby:

Did you have any, say a favorite chore and a hated chore?

Sandra Agan:

The only chore that I'm remembering is putting up hay. And I speak of this often in that as a child or youngster, I wasn't a child, I was early teens, you always had to help put up the hay and it was the small bales of hay, and to put them in the hay mow, you had to get them off the hay rack and up into the hay mow.

And to do that there was a tractor that pulled that up and that was my job, was to drive the tractor back and forth to pull the hay up into the mow. And then of course there were people, men, in the mow that stacked them once they got into the mow. That was the one chore that I remember very clearly. And we did it every day, all summer long.

Heather Libby:

It's hot and itchy, right?

Sandra Agan:

It wasn't that bad. It just seemed that way as a job.

Heather Libby:

Of course. So who did what kind of work on the farm? I've spoken to people, everybody pitched in kind of equally. I've spoken to people, it's been divided a little more along gender lines, or did you hire help?

Fred Agan:

Used to hire help to put up square bales, young boys around the neighborhood. A lot of them, I see them now and they're grown men and they speak to me and they start laughing. You don't remember me, do you? Because a lot of them were there in a lot of different times helping us hay.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Sandra Agan:

It was not common for the wife to work out in the field, but my dad went into using tractors early on in the early forties he had a tractor and my mother chose to help out driving tractor, and that was a little uncommon back in that day, usually the men did all that the women stayed in.

And so as a result of my mother working outside, then I did a lot of the inside chores as far as the cooking and the cleaning and that kind of thing.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Okay. Well actually that kind of leads us to what kind of farm machinery or technologies that you mentioned tractors. Do you have memories of other technology or maybe how it's changed over the decades?

Fred Agan:

Well, it started out as the population of corn wasn't what it is now. And along magically they use corn planters anymore that you used to and corn planters you just find it all the time. And these new planters and they come with something that's been planted, they automatically shut off and they go to the other side of it and they turn back on and move on. And that was something we never probably ever thought of it back then many years ago. And then of course most of the planters, there are two rows that time or four row, but now there out far as 12, 16, 24.

Heather Libby:

Noticed that just driving down the road. I detasseled corn one summer as a teenager. I don't think that we could walk through these... It's so tight now.

Sandra Agan:

Very narrow.

Heather Libby:

So that's not a thing anymore, I'm guessing.

Sandra Agan:

Right.

Fred Agan:

They would go with the machine and cut the tops off, tassel what they want to tassel.

Sandra Agan:

And these modern tractors are computerized to the point that you really aren't driving it. You just program it and then you just kind of watch it do its thing.

Heather Libby:

So has your farm, or do your renters use that more advanced technology now?

Fred Agan:

Well, they do both.

Sandra Agan:

Yeah. They used a drone to do some spraying just last spring. Which always before you had to... On the ground had to drive. But they used the drone. We started with... We didn't have horses. You might've, as a youngster.

Fred Agan:

Yeah, my dad did. I remember my dad... Working horses.

Sandra Agan:

We had some of probably the first tractors in the neighborhood. And the first one was a Farmall H, which is the smaller Farmall tractor. And that was the standard back in the forties. And then of course they've grown drastically since that time, and now they're very, very large.

Heather Libby:

And very, very expensive.

Sandra Agan:

Yes.

Heather Libby:

I am sure it's always been an investment.

Sandra Agan:

Yes.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Fred Agan:

Our youngest granddaughter's husband is an engineer at John Deere, and that's his job is help develop these new tractors.

Sandra Agan:

Develop a bigger one and more expensive one.

Fred Agan:

Bigger and bigger and more expensive.

Heather Libby:

Fascinating. So are there any members of your family still farming today?

Sandra Agan:

No.

Fred Agan:

No.

Sandra Agan:

And that is a concern.

Fred Agan:

Where I grew up, I was out with dad in Columbia, and I went to South here, and it was surrounded by Agans. And all of them farm and right now I'm probably the only one I remember. The group that's still involved. Of course, we don't do any of the farming, but we rent a farm out and so we have to make decisions once in a while. What we want to do so...

Sandra Agan:

We have three children. Two daughters and a son. Both daughters didn't marry into the farming, and the son as well is an attorney and he lives in Phoenix. So we really don't have anyone waiting to come into the farm.

Heather Libby:

Right. Yeah, that is a concern. Yeah.

Fred Agan:

It's been quite a discussion what we want to do with the farm. We'd kind of like for it to stay in the family, but who knows when any of them wants the responsibility of it.

Sandra Agan:

Yeah, because a responsibility. If you're not here and you're not using it for livelihood, it's more of a burden than it would a blessing.

Heather Libby:

Right. That's complicated. But I really appreciate you sharing that with us. I think that we have worked through most of our questions, but is there anything else that you were hoping to be able to speak on today?

Fred Agan:

Our two-year-old granddaughter was back, and she loves being there, and they live in Sacramento California, and she wants to move to Iowa.

Heather Libby:

In California?

Fred Agan:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

That's got to be hard.

Fred Agan:

She just loves to be outside and she's always wanting to go have a side by side. She's always wanting to go see the cows and stuff like that and other things.

Sandra Agan:

One other thing I might mention is the fact that the home that we live was built in 1886, so it's a very old home. And, would also say that it's on the pavement. So as a result, the early forties, that home was serviced then by electricity.

And so it's very unusual that that early, that farm was able to be accessed by all the modern conveniences. Because it was on a hard surface road. We got electricity. My dad was very innovative and we had central heating early on, we had water. Many farmsteads did not until later on, some of them into the fifties and even mid-fifties.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Fred Agan:

One of the things that really impresses, we wouldn't want to be without now, but when they came in so many years ago with the rural water, we signed up just a moment, said they were going to put a pipe by our house. And it's a blessing, because it's dry, you can use it from water, from livestock.

Sandra Agan:

I think that's one of the things that is driving the change in the rural agriculture in Iowa, is the fact that we have mega farms and we have people that may live in the country but they're not farming. They have, like we say, the mega farms and the people want to live out in the country because it's a nicer place to live. You can get all the modern conveniences, mostly, out in the country. And so that has changed drastically.

I think also it's changed the community as well, because we used to have community gatherings.

Heather Libby:

How so? Where would you meet?

Sandra Agan:

In the church. That was a biggie. And then we just had the school, we always had the little country school, and that was another big community gathering. That's where you met your neighbors, you'd have potlucks and do that kind of thing. And that has totally changed through the generation because the fact that people are not working on the land, they're working in town. They might be living in the country, but you don't have that community consolidation that you used to have.

Heather Libby:

Sure. One thing that's come up in some of my discussions is the farm crisis of the eighties. And you managed to keep your family farm going throughout that.

Sandra Agan:

Very close. It was very difficult.

Fred Agan:

Very difficult.

Sandra Agan:

We had purchased a hundred acres that adjoined ours, and that was just prior to the crisis hitting. And then we got in a very serious auto accident and hospitalized for about three and a half months and were able to get out from underneath that commitment and hang on what we had and we made it. But many of them did not. And we would not have, had we not have had the backing of my mother. She, of course, is the one that had owned the ground to start with and she kind of held us up until we could get our feet under us. But it was very close.

Fred Agan:

It's God awful being anymore, you figure you got to be a scientist to deal with all the things we do. It's chemicals and stuff. Sometimes wonder if we don't use too many chemicals.

Heather Libby:

Anything else?

Sandra Agan:

That's all I had jotted down.

Heather Libby:

Well, that was wonderful. You shared some details that I haven't heard and know about before, so I just want to thank you so much for being able and willing to share your experiences. These are precious memories that we need to preserve and hopefully it will serve as inspiration for future farmers as well. All right.

Fred Agan:

My family always used to gather three to four times a year, everybody. And I don't know if you've played Corn Hole?

Heather Libby:

Oh yeah. That's a fun game.

Fred Agan:

Yeah, there's a lot of contest about that.

Sandra Agan:

And that's one other thing...

Fred Agan:

My son is very competitive.

Sandra Agan:

One other thing I might say, as growing up on the farm, I think you find a very cohesiveness of the family, because they work together as a team, and many times they play together just because you're isolated pretty much from all the other divergence. And so I think maybe as a result you get tighter family unit living on a farm.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Wonderful. Okay, well I'm going to end it now and thank you both so much again.