

Heather Libby:

All right. Here we go. So, we're here, today, at the Knoxville Public Library. My name's Heather Libby. I'm the Adult Services Librarian, and today I'll be speaking with...

John Jensen:

John Jensen.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Thank you, John. And, if you could tell me where you live now?

John Jensen:

Live here in Knoxville.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And, if you don't mind sharing your birth year for us, that helps put things in context.

John Jensen:

Well, I'm working on being ancient. 1949.

Heather Libby:

Oh, not at all. And then, today you're going to be sharing your memories about growing up on a farm. So, if those memories are from somewhere other than Knoxville, if you could tell us that.

John Jensen:

It is. I grew up down in Ringgold County, southwest of Creston, and about 20 miles north of the Missouri line.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So, yeah. That's a different region. We haven't heard stories from there, yet. So if you could tell me, how did your family come to live on a farm in Iowa?

John Jensen:

Well, I guess I'm not sure how to make the story longer, short actually.

Heather Libby:

I was-

John Jensen:

I'll start with my mother's side. My mother's parents, my grandparents, immigrated from Denmark. I think it was 1910. They were always involved in agriculture out in western Iowa, and then finally moved to farms down in Adams County. My grandpa was a farmer and a carpenter.

On my dad's side, my dad came over from Denmark in 1926. Before he and mom were married, he worked on different farms around Iowa, and actually up even into South Dakota. So, it's been

agricultural orientation all the time. When they got married, they bought the farm down by Clearfield. That's of course, then, where I eventually came into the picture.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about, maybe, the size of your family's farm and your family that lived on it, brothers, sisters, etc.?

John Jensen:

Well, besides myself, I have one brother, two years younger than myself. Our farm was an 80-acre farm. I know that in some years before I was born, dad rented some additional land. For most of my growing up time, I only know the 80 as our home farm.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So, do you have a favorite story about growing up on the farm?

John Jensen:

I looked at that-

Heather Libby:

Or more.

John Jensen:

... question, and I don't know, honestly.

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

John Jensen:

I guess from that end, because I've worked in agriculture all my adult life also, the one thing I did think of was... I had a little spot, just a hair bigger than this room, that the folks let me have as my play yard. I built play farms on it, and-

Heather Libby:

Oh.

John Jensen:

... this and that. Had my toy tractors and built farm machinery to work with them. So in the evenings, or whatnot, I farmed on my own-

Heather Libby:

Oh, that's special.

John Jensen:

... in the corner of the backyard.

Heather Libby:

That's nice. How about you and your brother? Did you guys get into trouble together, or... It's fine if you don't-

John Jensen:

Ah. Yeah.

Heather Libby:

... or if a memory doesn't come to mind.

John Jensen:

Well, my first reaction is, "My folks have been dead many years, but there's still a couple things I don't want to admit."

Heather Libby:

That's awesome. Okay. Well, if anything comes to mind that you do want to share, we'll circle back, if we need to. Could you tell me a little more about what your family grew on the farm?

John Jensen:

Well, it was basically a livestock farm.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

The crop supported the livestock. The folks had a dairy, had a farrow-to-finish hog operation. Then, we had a large flock of chickens every year. Folks didn't raise the chickens. They bought baby chicks, actually, and raised them. The field crops were corn, oats, and alfalfa, along with pasture. Basically, the crop went through the livestock.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

I suspect dad may have sold corn once or twice, but I don't remember. I do remember a lot of times he bought additional corn, or oats, to supplement feed on the farm.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So, that actually kind of answers the question about what animals your family raised. How was the work distributed with all that livestock?

John Jensen:

Well, it was-

Heather Libby:

Was it just your-

John Jensen:

Unlike-

Heather Libby:

... parents-

John Jensen:

Yes.

Heather Libby:

... and you?

John Jensen:

Yes, yes. The parents, and then my brother and I, as we got older. Of course, the traditional division of duties. Dad did all the outside work. Mom did the housework and this and that, but mom was also the hired man, you might say. Mom and dad worked together. The dairy, we milked by hand. So, they both milked in the morning and the evening. When corn picking time came, the corn was shucked by hand. We didn't have a mechanical corn picker.

Heather Libby:

It sounds like too much work for the hours in the day.

John Jensen:

Well, it's totally different what we think about today.

Heather Libby:

Right.

John Jensen:

... other than if you might relate it to the Amish.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

John Jensen:

So, mom worked outside a lot, in addition to the housework and the preparing food, and this and that.

Heather Libby:

So, did you grow any of your own food?

John Jensen:

All of it.

Heather Libby:

All of your food. Yeah.

John Jensen:

And looking at that question, I was thinking, "Okay." I know probably flour, sugar, salt, and pepper are kind of the first things that came to mind that were purchased.

Heather Libby:

Right.

John Jensen:

But, we raised all our meat. We had a big garden. All the gardening went into storage for the winter. We didn't have freezers, so mom did a lot of canning-

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

John Jensen:

... to have that. Had a large tater patch. I, to this day, don't really want to pick up potatoes, but.

Heather Libby:

It's hard.

John Jensen:

Mom baked bread, I think three times a week, five loaves of bread three times a week. For me as a kid, it was a treat to get what we called boughten bread-

Heather Libby:

Oh.

John Jensen:

... bread from town. Now, I don't happen to care for town bread. I wish I could have some more home baked bread.

Heather Libby:

Exactly. Right. Isn't it funny how that switches?

John Jensen:

Okay. Kay's pointing out something. We didn't have a basement in our home.

Heather Libby:

Oh.

John Jensen:

The vegetables, and even the canned goods and that, were stored in a cave.

Heather Libby:

Oh, in a cave.

John Jensen:

So-

Heather Libby:

Was that like a cellar, a manmade-

John Jensen:

Cellar.

Heather Libby:

... cave?

John Jensen:

Yes.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Yeah.

John Jensen:

That's correct. A cellar.

Heather Libby:

Was it near the home? How far was it from the kitchen?

John Jensen:

Just outside the back door, basically.

Heather Libby:

I think my great aunt had one of those. It was so fun to go down into. Did you have a favorite meal that your mom would prepare? I'm sorry. I know that's not on the list, but I'm always curious about that-

John Jensen:

Well-

Heather Libby:

Or, something you miss, maybe.

John Jensen:

It has changed, but fried-

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

John Jensen:

... chicken was always special at home. A lot of times, fried chicken was the Sunday noon meal.

Heather Libby:

Wonderful. What kind of machinery, or technology, did your family use on the farm-

John Jensen:

Well-

Heather Libby:

... if you recall?

John Jensen:

Even for the day, it was older technology. I'm talking, now, when I remember in the '50s and '60s. Dad started farming there in 1940, so that was nine years before I was born. I still remember dad's last team of horses. I remember that he did some work with the horses. The tractor was a small two-plow tractor. We had all the implements that went with it, excepting for bailer, combine, corn picker, that type of thing. As I got older, dad hired custom operators to do some of that work -

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

... except for corn picking. We picked our own corn.

Heather Libby:

Right. That's hot and scratchy work. Do you remember driving the tractor?

John Jensen:

Oh, yeah.

Heather Libby:

How old were you? I'm curious. I've had-

John Jensen:

Honestly, I don't-

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

... remember that-

Heather Libby:

... he was five-

John Jensen:

I almost-

Heather Libby:

... the first time he was on-

John Jensen:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

... a tractor.

John Jensen:

I almost think the first time I drove a tractor is for the neighbor-

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay.

John Jensen:

... across the road. I probably was 11 or 12, first time I was on a-

Heather Libby:

Sure.

John Jensen:

... tractor.

Heather Libby:

Was there-

John Jensen:

I was-

Heather Libby:

... a lot of cooperation among-

John Jensen:

11 and 12 is almost the first time I drove a pickup.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay.

John Jensen:

The neighbor's pickup.

Heather Libby:

A little different. Yeah.

John Jensen:

No. By the time I'm old enough to remember, you started to ask about cooperation, there-

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

John Jensen:

... wasn't much neighboring, as we called it. Before I was born, and when I was just real little -

Heather Libby:

Right.

John Jensen:

... dad was still part of a threshing ring-

Heather Libby:

Oh, good.

John Jensen:

... down there. Of course, for people listening to this, don't know anything about threshing rings, somebody owned the threshing machine. They would go around to various farms and set up. Then, the neighbors would get together and haul the oats in and help process, on each farm. So, that was part of the threshing ring. But, no. No cooperating like, "I'll help you. You help me -

Heather Libby:

Sure.

John Jensen:

... as I got older.

Heather Libby:

So, why did the threshing rings kind of go by the wayside? Was it just-

John Jensen:

The combine.

Heather Libby:

The combine. Okay.

John Jensen:

A little history there. Case Manufacturing Company built their last threshing machine in 1953. They built their last combine in 1969.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

But, the combine basically put the threshing machine out of business, in a lot of instances. Now, I say that because the Amish, today, still use threshing machines.

Heather Libby:

Well, gets the job done. Right? All right. Are any members of your family still farming?

John Jensen:

Not immediate family.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

I've got a brother-in-Law that's farming and two second cousins that are farming. My brother and I never went back to the farm.

Heather Libby:

All right. Is anyone still farming your family farm?

John Jensen:

No.

Heather Libby:

You said that's-

John Jensen:

It was liquidated in 1967.

Heather Libby:

1967. All right. Well, is there anything that we didn't manage to speak on today that you were hoping we would?

John Jensen:

No. I didn't, honestly, go that far with my thinking.

Heather Libby:

Well it was excellent. I mean, I learned some new things, and you had some great little tidbits to share. So, I really appreciate that, so. I'm just going to thank you for being willing to share your experience about what life was like growing up on a farm in Iowa. These are precious memories to be recorded.

John Jensen:

Okay. Give you one more-

Heather Libby:

Okay. Just-

John Jensen:

... a little tidbit-

Heather Libby:

... one more-

John Jensen:

... from where I grew up.

Heather Libby:

Please.

John Jensen:

The country was known as Lapland country.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

That's where Iowa done lapped over into Missouri.

Heather Libby:

Oh. I didn't know that. That's like a piece of trivia.

John Jensen:

The Southern-

Heather Libby:

Maybe, I'll put it in the library trivia.

John Jensen:

The Southern interior counties in Iowa is known as Lapland Country.

Heather Libby:

Lapland. Done lap into Missouri. That's great. Thank you. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

John, you did a lot of work for neighboring farmers. When we were back down there, you point out what tractor you drove there and what work you did-

John Jensen:

By the time I got toward high school, and that. As I realized today, dad shouldered more of the work on our place. I worked in the hay fields for the neighbors. I was a farm labor worker for-

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

... the neighbors-

Speaker 1:

Right.

John Jensen:

... putting up hay. When I started doing that, wages were 75 cents an hour. Then, they went to a dollar an hour for several years. That was when I was in high school. Through it all, and these times were different, but I managed to save enough money to basically pay for my first year of college-

Heather Libby:

That's amazing.

John Jensen:

...at Ames, along with some assistance up there.

Heather Libby:

Right. What did you study there?

John Jensen:

Ag business.

Heather Libby:

Business. So you went into an adjacent field, just didn't farm yourself, as an adult, is that-

John Jensen:

Yeah. Well, actually, I started in engineering. I found if I wanted a college degree, I had to get away from chemistry and physics. So, I switched to-

Heather Libby:

Okay.

John Jensen:

...ag business. My whole adult life. I've worked in the lending field with farmers.

Heather Libby:

Okay. All right. Well, wonderful. I'm going to stop the recording, but thank you again, for sharing your memories. This has been a really great conversation.