

Speaker 1:

Okay, recording from Monroe County, Carnegie Evans Public Library. Thank you for joining us today. Can you give us your name?

Alan Ammons:

I am Alan Ammons.

Speaker 1:

And are you willing to give us your birth year?

Alan Ammons:

1947.

Speaker 1:

All right. And if you could please tell me where you live and if the reminiscences today are from another location, describe that location as well.

Alan Ammons:

I still live on a farm in Monroe County. I do not live on the home farm. My brother actually lives on the home farm. We live about eight miles from the home farm and reminiscences will be from Monroe County.

Speaker 1:

How did your family come to live on a farm in Iowa?

Alan Ammons:

I think back in the 1940s, that was the norm rather than the exception. My father was born and raised on the farm that he owned when he passed away, but his father had him own that farm. And when my father and mother got married in about 1945, they moved to the farm full-time and my grandma and grandpa moved to Albia, so dad had been farming previous to that. Grandpa had been farming previous to that and today they're still Ammons on that farm. My brother Paul is the full-time farmer of the Ammons crew and he is out there on that farm today.

Speaker 1:

Do you know, did they settle that farm originally, your grandparents?

Alan Ammons:

No, my grandfather Ammons came from Seymour, Iowa originally to that farm in Monroe County, which is in Wayne County. Seymour is, but he and his parents had come from West Virginia area many years before that and we have still lots of Ammons family buried at the Seymour Cemetery. So Seymour, Iowa is kind of home of the Ammons crew, but we've been in the Albia area for many years and there are none left around the Seymour area.

Speaker 1:

What is your favorite story about growing up on the farm?

Alan Ammons:

Lots of really good times out there on the farm and probably difficult as to separate out any particular event and say that was the highlight of my time growing up. I think one of the highlights of the farm life as a young kid in those days was that you were in your element all day long, you lived and worked and went to school and everything you did centered around the family farm. We went to a country grade school and so just lots of time spent on the farm with brothers, sister and mom and dad and neighbor kids.

One of the really good things that I remember about the farm was as kids, we always grew up swimming a lot, swimming in the ponds, the farm ponds, and sometimes you had to kind of chase a snake or two away to feel real comfortable and we didn't always feel comfortable doing that. We tried to stay to the other side of the pond. We did a lot of swimming, hot weather like today, handling hay, putting up small round bales of hay and then go to the field or go to the pool out to the pool, go to the pond.

Speaker 1:

Pond.

Alan Ammons:

At noon for a quick workshop and go back and work in the afternoon and then again in the evening after chores go back out and spend another half hour or so in the pond. We enjoyed that a lot.

Speaker 1:

Do you remember who taught you to swim on the farm pond?

Alan Ammons:

I think well, yeah, we learned to swim with any degree of ability at the Albia pool, the old Albia pool, my mother. There were some things that my mom and dad insisted on us doing and learning to swim and do a pretty good job of swimming was one of them. And she would drive us 13 miles in and 13 miles home every day for two weeks to go to swimming lessons every year. That was a must.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I remember that too. But I thought maybe you'd have similar memory to me of, I remember my first memories of swimming were being kind of tossed into the farm pond that we had too and those are good memories.

Alan Ammons:

We grew up on the farm and so we were in the ponds before we took swimming lessons, but mom and dad insisted that we learned to swim pretty well and we did that time in the Albia pool, but we did most of our swimming on the farm ponds.

Speaker 1:

What kinds of crops did your family grow?

Alan Ammons:

Our farm was always a very diversified operation, a rough southwestern hill country of Southern Monroe County, and so we had a lot of hay, a lot of pasture, always had some oats and therefore some alfalfa or other grass hays, always some corn, not a lot. My dad, we didn't have a lot of good tillable dirt. We were more in rough rolling pasture country and hay country, but dad always had some hay for feed for the cattle and for the hogs. We always had livestock around and later in my time at home before I left to go to school or to college, we did raise a few soybeans, but they were kind of an afterthought for me at my age. I was born in '47, so by the time I was 18 years old, I was gone from home and the soy beans were just becoming an important cash crop in Iowa by that time, at least in our part of southern Iowa.

Speaker 1:

And you touched on this a little bit, but what kind of animals did your family raise?

Alan Ammons:

Dad always had, I guess I would say that the cattle and hogs were his staple. Our staple, we had a lot of sows around a lot compared to today would be not relevant, but a lot for that time of maybe 45 to 50 head of sows, another group of cows about that same size. And we did a farrow finish hog operation, then raised the hogs from farrowing to finish sold fairly local or perhaps in Ottumwa part of the time. But then the cattle operation was cow calf operation mostly. We did not fatten any cattle, always sold the cattle kind of in the fall after they come off the cow or perhaps hold a few of them over for sale in the spring after putting a little more weight on them but did not have sheep during most of the time that I was home kind of late in my time there.

We did have a handful of sheep that came mostly I think from some of my younger brothers as 4H livestock and dad kind of got interested in the sheep again, always had chickens. I wasn't a fan of the chickens, but we always had a lot of chickens because mom loved the eggs and we all did. But then we also butchered a lot of chickens every year. I think I need to talk to some of my brothers who have better memories than I, but I believe that we butchered around 50 chickens every year for winter and year-round food supply, and mom would get little chickens in. When we would go into the... I don't know what they called it today, but the place where you get little chickens that got shipped in and we would take them home and she would start with the little tiny chicks and we would help her raise them all the way up till butchering time or time to get rid of some old hens and replace some of the hens in the lane flock with them.

Speaker 1:

At that time, like a butchering operation for that many chickens I think would require a lot of people. Do you remember it being a situation where there were a lot of hands on deck helping?

Alan Ammons:

The hands on deck at our place... My father had nothing to do with it. He was in the field or taking care of the cattle or taking care of the hogs, but he would ignore the hens or the chickens and it meant the older boys, there were seven of us in our family, six boys and one girl just younger than I. And that meant someone of the older boys going down and pulling a bunch of ready to harvest roosters out of the flock, grabbing them and bringing them up. And it was a kind of blood and guts operation quite frankly. But we did it. The boys and mom did it. Mom was in charge of that as she did it herself. And we would butcher six or eight a day or maybe even as many as 10 on a day or two, but for the most part, probably five or six a day.

And it was kind of an ongoing deal. It was a deal of the kids and mom doing it and she was... We had to help. I remember detesting the... Well it gets too bloody to tell how we did it, but the picking of the hens after, I just hated it. Mom would do most of that, pick the feathers off of them after we had drenched them in boiling water to get the dead ones obviously, and then just start gutting and as my older years, mom taught all of us kids to the various parts of the chickens that she wanted and the way to cut them and we did a good job of doing it.

Speaker 1:

It's incredible knowledge to have.

Alan Ammons:

It is.

Speaker 1:

Although sometimes it's disturbing to people to hear it if they're not familiar with it. But it's an important part of farm life I think, and the processing of our-

Alan Ammons:

Absolutely.

Speaker 1:

Animals and our food.

Alan Ammons:

Raising your own food and then being able to process it was critical. We had a freezer. We were probably early on and because there were seven kids and we were on a hard scrabble little farm that didn't have a lot of income or opportunity and you raised your own food as much as you could and mom and dad bought a freezer. Very early in my youth, I remember having a freezer there and we kept it absolutely packed full, but mom was... Make sure that it was full of everything that we raised. Chickens, garden stuff. Dad would butcher one hog a year I think, and have friends and neighbors over to help do that. And then he would go help butcher a hog with the other neighbors. Frankly, I don't remember ever butchering a beef on the farm.

I'm not sure that we didn't, but I do remember later on having a beef butcher and we didn't have room to put beef along with all the can stuff and everything else in the freezer. So that was kept at a locker plant here in Albia we had locker plants here in town. That was interesting.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I remember those days too. And you kind of have got into a little bit of the next question, which was growing your own food. Do you remember how big the garden was?

Alan Ammons:

Mom always had a huge garden and again, that was totally mom's responsibility. Dad wanted nothing to do with it, as long as she was taking care of it with seven kids as help, then he was good with that. But dad, no, that's not true. Dad would help us. He was responsible for planting the potatoes, we helping

him with a kind of an old plow assembly that he had fixed up to plant potatoes and then also to plow potatoes with and... But to size it today, I would say that it was, who knows, it was a very large garden compared to anything that we have around today that we see most of the gardens, because we lived out of that garden the year round pretty much. I remember on hot days, mom would always get us up good time after we got done milking, we would go down to the garden for a period of time, weeding, hoeing. It was miserable work, I hated it.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Alan Ammons:

But we went out there and we spent a couple hours in the morning and then a little later on you'd be picking peas and she might go out early after we got done milking, she would perhaps go out and gather peas in and then we all had to help shell and there'd be five or six of us kids sitting around there in the kitchen shelling peas, and it was quite an operation.

Speaker 1:

Did any of the kids ever try to get out of the work?

Alan Ammons:

I'm sure that we did. I don't think it ever worked because mom made sure that we were all involved in it. I mean, we did get out if there was a school thing needed to be gone to or if there was a 4H event or something needed to be gone to that lucky individual might get out of it. But for the most part, mom made sure that we were... Or dad had something special for us to do out with any of the other heavier, large livestock, we would maybe get out of it for a few hours, but it was just kind of a... We didn't do it for half a day at a time, but we would certainly do it every day for a few hours, a couple of hours.

Speaker 1:

A lot of work that life, the farm life. So I think generally the family just accepted it as part of it that you worked.

Alan Ammons:

That's exactly right. That's how we live, was working together as a family to support what we needed to do.

Speaker 1:

And we have gone into this a little bit, but who did what kind of work on the farm. Other than what you've already mentioned? Were there any other clear divisions of the types of work?

Alan Ammons:

Mom was responsible entirely for the household stuff, but with my one sister's help. My sister is just younger than I, two years younger than I and Linda was... She was exempted from the milking duties. She was not exempted from the gardening duties, she was still involved in that, but mom did all of the household cooking and cleaning and this kind of stuff. And dad was always in charge of the row crop, the hay, the pasture, the cattle on pasture, the farrowing house, the hogs. He really enjoyed working with

his hogs and he spent... Did a good job and took good care of them both and the cattle. But he spent his time with the larger livestock even in the mornings and the evenings chore. And he would be out taking care of the hogs and the cattle and we would be in the milk house with mom or in the old barn milking by hand.

This was an on by hand up to 10 or 11 cows, probably maximum 12, maybe a time or two, but probably generally milking about eight head of cows night and morning with mom's help always. She was there. She was a bulldog for work. She'd be there making sure we were there, frankly, and getting it done. And it was kind of a rush on a morning before school to get up and catch a school bus at 7:20 and have milked seven or eight cows by hand ahead of that time and grabbed a quick bite to eat and changed clothes and stuff. It was a job. But so mom did that. The kids were assisting with everything. Dad had us helping with the cattle and the hogs too. And particularly when school wasn't ongoing, we were helping with all the work on the haying and that kind of stuff.

Speaker 1:

Did the milk get sold off of the farm or was that just for your consumption?

Alan Ammons:

We used the milk. At that time early on, the milk was... Mom and dad had a separator and we'd run all the milk through a separator. And again, mom was in charge of taking care of the separation. Dad would do that occasionally, but separate the cream from the milk and from the skim milk and the skim milk would usually go off and be fed to the hogs. It would be, as I remember, held to clabber over, put in old cans out outside and set and just keep adding to it. And dad would dump from the large 10 gallon milk can. Dad would dump from there into buckets to feed the hogs. One set of hogs that was not too far away from the house, he would carry that clabbered milk down there every day. The cream was saved. Frankly, I can't remember what we did with ice.

We had a cave and I suppose that cream may have been placed in the cave, in the coolness of the cave, an underground cave for keeping until usually on Saturday afternoon, mom and dad would head to town. Us kids would go with them and they would take the cream in and sell it, but the milk itself was not. Now later on, as my younger brothers came up through the ranks, they did start to sell whole milk to a company and they started actually using milkers and milking a few more cows by that time. But during my time there, it was just separated and cream sold skim milk off to the hogs. We drank out of it of course. I remember yet, if you left a jug of whole milk sitting in the refrigerator, you can imagine, we think sometimes we get a little bit of cream on the top of our one or 2% milk. You set whole milk in there, it's a different circumstance. I don't know if I could handle that today or not, but it seemed to be good at the time.

Speaker 1:

What kind of farm machinery or technology was used?

Alan Ammons:

I would say technology was pretty far and few between, almost non-existent. Dad, I barely remember helping him feed hay a time or two in the wintertime with a team of horses. He had a team of horses when grandpa had had horses around, and I don't know if grandpa ever ran a tractor, but when dad was there, I can remember, he had today a pretty old machine, an H farm. Dad bought a new H farm in 1950 and I would've been three years old. So we had a tractor and at that time he still had the team of horses

around, but I don't remember using them very much with exception of helping feed hay a time or two to the cattle. Older machinery that included a planter, all the relevant... I remember him planting corn with a, I can't even say the right word.

I'm going to call it a trip wire, but a planter wire that you had to move it at the edge of the field for each row. And there are lots of people that could tell you the detail, but I'm not one of them. That didn't last very long until he moved to a newer modern planter. He always had an old pool type combine that he harvested oats with. We didn't have any beans at that time. And pretty early on, dad had a mounted picker, a two row mounted picker for his H farmall that would pretty much tie the tractor up. Once you put the picker on, you kind of wanted to be done. I remember it was fun for us boys riding in the box as dad picked corn riding back there and we seemed to think we were helping doing something nailing it back or something.

I don't know what we were doing, but I remember picking corn. I remember pick... I shouldn't tell this maybe, but I remember picking corn on an old ridge, which was on a farm like a half a mile away from our home. It didn't border our home farm. And there was a great big old oak tree out there in the center of that field. And dad didn't ever tear that oak field up, that oak tree up. We just farmed around it. And many years later, many years later, dad said, "I'd really like to be buried out under that old oak tree up at the corner up there." But he said by that time I and my brother Paul were both farming and he said he'd have to get mom to go up there and put a couple cattle panels around it to protect it or else the boys would be up there and plow him under.

Anyway, that oak tree is there today and it's right in front of where my brother Paul's home. He is the farmer of the crew and it's right in front of his home today and out not very far from it there's a century farm designation on a big rock out there.

Speaker 1:

Very cool.

Alan Ammons:

We try to remember our parents in that regard.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I think that would make them very happy. Still a special place. How many members of your family are still farming?

Alan Ammons:

I think I could say probably only one of my siblings that I know, only one of my siblings. And even I have uncle who is farming still and he's in his eighties, he's too hardheaded to quit, so he keeps going. But brother Paul is the only farmer of the crew and two other of us boys did farm at various times in our career. And I farmed after several years in the Navy or four years in the Navy and then later in the Navy Reserve. And after four years of college at Iowa State I started farming and about the same time my brother and I did, and then another brother was farming part-time at that time. But today I live on the farm, my wife and I, and raised our families on the farm, but we don't actively farm it very much.

We have a lot of the land is in CRP and the actual row crop work is so modernized and so technology dependent. And so just improved in advance since I don't want to own the machinery it takes to farm a couple of hundred acres of land anymore and brother Paul farms that ground and farms a lot of other ground obviously too. But we do... I still farm I guess in that I do some custom CRP planting for folks and

so I'm involved in that every spring and some in the fall. And then caring for our own farms, having several hundred acres of that CRP and other stuff to take care of. So we care for our own farms. I guess I'm still involved in it to that degree. And my youngest son, Nathan, lives just a quarter mile from me and he has ambition to be involved in that. But we keep him pretty busy in the farm real estate business and he doesn't have much time for that either.

Speaker 1:

It's changed a lot then-

Alan Ammons:

It has. What you had no idea years ago, many members of a family would remain farming. Today with the equipment, with the technology, with all of the advancements, one farmer is farming several hundred or several, perhaps a couple or 3000 acres worth of land and therefore there's not room for every farmer out there. And frankly, in the eighties about made a believer out of me that I didn't need to farm anymore.

Speaker 1:

Well, I thank you for sharing your memories. Thank you very much. Appreciate you being willing to share your experience about what life was like on a farm in Iowa.

Alan Ammons:

You're very kind. Thank you for the opportunity, Amy.