

Heather Libby:

Okay, I think we're recording. So I am Heather Libby with the Knoxville Public Library, here today with John Jordan. And we are in Knoxville, Iowa. So can you tell me your name and where you live?

John Jordan:

My name is John Jordan. I live west of Knoxville on a farm.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And are you willing to share your birth year?

John Jordan:

Yes, 1948.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And then if your memories are from somewhere other than where you live now, if you could share that location, so if you're going to be talking about a different town or county.

John Jordan:

I'll be talking about where I was born and raised, around Beech, Iowa. It's a Pleasantville address.

Heather Libby:

Okay, so that's still in Marion County, yes, or no?

John Jordan:

No. It was in Warren County.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay. Warren County, all right. All right. So can you tell me, John, how did your family come to live on a farm in Iowa?

John Jordan:

Well, my great-grandfather came here from Germany and he bought some farm in Marion County, one of the first people to purchase ground in Marion County. And my grandfather was one of the younger kids. And when all of his kids got married, at least the younger ones, he gave them each 40 acres. And the 40 acres was across the road where they lived. And actually, it's the farm where I live today, because I live on my grandparents' farm. But I was born up in Warren County, it's close to Pleasantville; there's a little town named Beech.

And that's where I started to go to school at, at Beech school, until I was in fourth grade. And then Beech closed down and we all went to Pleasantville. So I graduated from Pleasantville. I took FFA in school in high school at Pleasantville, and worked on the family farm. And we had about everything you could think of. We raised eggs to sell for groceries. And we had some cows we milked, and we sold the cream for grocery money and to live on. And then we raised hogs and we raised cattle and chickens and we had a couple horses. And we even had some ducks to entertain us.

Heather Libby:

Well, that's great. And so it looks like we're getting at some of the questions about what crops your family grew. Well we might come back to some of those in a little bit.

John Jordan:

Yeah, sure.

Heather Libby:

No, but that's great. So this was ... was it a large scale operation, or-

John Jordan:

Well, back at the time, my dad owned 160 acres and we rented about another 160. So at the time, that was about average. And a person could make a pretty good living on that to raise a family.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And was it just your family who worked the farm?

John Jordan:

Did what?

Heather Libby:

Did just your family work the farm?

John Jordan:

Yes, just our family. And they didn't work off the farm. We made all our income from the farm.

Heather Libby:

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

John Jordan:

Well, we lived on a mud road that wasn't graveled until I got to be a junior in high school. So there weren't too many people living on a mud road back then when I went to school. And that was kind of a hardship. Every time it rained, we had trouble getting in and out from our house. But it was an interesting way to live, that's for sure. We had to depend on the weather a lot when we went somewhere.

Heather Libby:

Right. Were you stuck there a lot, if it would rain or snow?

John Jordan:

Well, we had ways to get out. We had to go up and meet the school bus. And I drove a Model A Ford car. And I was about 12, 13 years old and my dad got tired of driving us up there, so he said, "Just drive

your own self." So I drove me and my sister and my brother about a mile up to meet the bus when it was muddy. So I learned how to operate a car in the mud pretty early.

Heather Libby:

Those were complicated, right, from descriptions I read, getting those things started.

John Jordan:

Well, yes, when it was too damp, it didn't start very good. My dad had to go out and he would put some kerosene on a corn cob with a cloth around it and light it. And then he would get the car dried off, the spark plugs and around the distributor, so it would start. So I remember him doing that several mornings when it was really foggy.

Heather Libby:

That's quite the production getting to school. And then it would sit there during the day until you got off the bus?

John Jordan:

Yeah, I'd just leave it up there. And then when the bus came and brought us home at night, I'd drive back home.

Heather Libby:

Well, that's fine. Okay. So you went over what kind of crops your family grew, and animals. Were you involved in a lot of the crop growing, or the animal-

John Jordan:

Oh yeah, my dad had me driving a tractor when I was about five years old. My sister and I, we raked hay. And I put up hay when I could hardly lift a bale. We had livestock, we had cattle, so we had to put up quite a few acres of hay. And then we had corn and soybeans. We had hogs we had to feed out and sold. And we had oats too. We had oats every year. So we fed oats and we also needed the straw for bedding. So we had hay, oats, corn and soybeans is what we raised.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And so in your day-to-day as a child, were you doing a lot of chores, helping out a lot with all of this work?

John Jordan:

Yes. We didn't have to do too many chores in the morning. My dad usually did them, but we made up for it when we came home, because the bus came about quarter till 7:00. So we didn't have much time to go out and do chores, because that was before daylight savings time. But it still didn't give you much time to do the chores in the morning. But we had plenty of time to do it in the evening. So I was doing chores as long as I can remember, carrying water-

Heather Libby:

They never end.

John Jordan:

... and feed, and cleaning out pens and stuff. So yes, I did a lot of chores.

Heather Libby:

So did you guys garden, raise your own food?

John Jordan:

Oh yes, we had a pretty good-sized garden. My mom liked to garden. We had to do a lot of hoeing, pull out the weeds. And that wasn't quite as bad as snapping beans and shelling peas. And she did a lot of canning, and that was something else we did quite a bit. We picked raspberries, we picked blackberries back on the farm, that grew wild, and gooseberries and whatever she wanted to make a pie out of, mulberries. Picked up walnuts so we could have something to eat in the wintertime. We'd shell them out and dry them out, and hickory nuts also. And then we would eat them as a treat in the wintertime. And we'd also use them in baking things too.

But she also ... we raised chickens and we always had to wash eggs and crate them, which got to be kind of boring. We'd probably sell, oh probably, I think there was about, let's see, I would say about 20 dozen a week we would sell. We had enough chickens to sell that many eggs sometimes, sometimes less, depending on the time of year and how much the chickens were laying. But that was a job too, and not break them.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. How did you guys sell them? Did you bring them in town, or-

John Jordan:

Yeah, there used to be produce houses where you could bring your eggs to town in a carton or crate, and your milk or your cream in a cream can. And then they would grade it and take it, and then give your cream can back and give you some more crates to put eggs in. It wasn't always the ones you had, but they'd send you some back to replace them. So we always had something to fill up to bring to town.

Heather Libby:

All right. And so I think you've gotten into it a little bit, but a little bit about the division of labor. Who did what kind of work on the farm? Did you all pitch in regardless, or-

John Jordan:

We all had to work in the garden. We all had to do the chores. My sister and I were about a year and a half apart, so she was a year and a half older than me, so she did a lot of outside work too. My mom didn't really require her to do much inside. My mom did all the laundry and stuff. My sister didn't have to. So my sister was pretty much a tomboy outside and helped us a lot. She drove the tractor and everything too. And then my brother's about six years younger than me. And he was a little young when we were growing up, but he finally had to take over too, when we left home.

Heather Libby:

Okay. What kind of farm machinery or technology ... I know you mentioned tractor, but ...

John Jordan:

Well, we had tractors. And the technology that was in them was pretty simple. Most of the stuff you could work on yourself. We overhauled our own tractors, sometimes, the motors if they needed it. And we fixed about everything ourselves. We didn't take anything to town to have it fixed. And it was a pretty simple lifestyle, really.

Heather Libby:

Well, that leads us into the last question, which I think covers a lot. So how many members of your family are still farming? And I know at least you are. And that could also be an opportunity for us to talk about the ways in which things have changed from the memories that you so far shared with us.

John Jordan:

Yeah, it changed a lot from when I was growing up. I had to go to the service, I was drafted for two years. I was wanting to farm. The year I got drafted I was putting a crop in and had to just leave it. So I lost everything that year. And then I didn't get back until the end of May, so I couldn't farm that year. So I lost out three years of farming. But then I stayed in it, and I've been farming ever since, til today.

I had to work off the farm in order to make enough money to farm. We went through the farm crisis of the '80s, which was pretty tough. Interest rates were very, very high. We were talking about close to 20% interest on operating loan money, and real estate was about 10.5%, because you could only get a variable, you couldn't get a fixed rate. And I was buying a farm, and I got stuck in all that. And I remember one year when I did my taxes, my tax man said ... I gave him my amount that I paid in interest, and he said, "That can't be right. That's all your income." I said, "Yes, it was all my income." But I stayed on the farm. It took a lot of hard work, working off the farm. My wife worked off the farm and we was able to keep it. And so today, my son is farming with his family, but he works off the farm, too. We've got-

Heather Libby:

On the same farm?

John Jordan:

No.

John Jordan:

He's got a farm that his grandfather had, over between Lacona and Melcher. And his grandfather sold that to him, and he bought it. And he bought some other ground around there. So he's got about 460 acres of farming ground. He's doing quite well. But he didn't have to pay for those expensive interest rates that I had to, so his interest rates were hardly nothing, back here the last 10 years. So he's doing fine. He doesn't really have any livestock, but he raises corn, soybeans and hay, and sells it. And he's -

Heather Libby:

And what about you now? Are you farming basically the same stuff that you did growing up, or has your crop selection changed?

John Jordan:

Well, actually, the farm that I grew up on, my sister, me and my brother inherited. And I'm the only farmer, so I farm it. And then I farm my farm too, so I've got 640 acres and that was 160 acres up there. So I've got plenty to do if I want to.

Heather Libby:

That's an understatement. That's good.

John Jordan:

But I haven't embraced the new technology too much. I've pretty much kept the machinery that I know how to operate really well that I used during the '80s and '90s.

Heather Libby:

And is it still going? Are you still fixing it yourself, or-

John Jordan:

Yeah, most of it I could fix myself. And it's still working, and that's about the same kind of machinery that my son uses. One nice thing about it, when we're done at the end of the year, we don't have to make any payments to John Deere or Case International. We're done. No money goes to them.

Heather Libby:

What very little I know about those is they're very expensive and very complicated machinery.

John Jordan:

Yes. Someday, we may have to embrace it, but for the moment, we get along just fine. We hire our spraying and some of our stuff done that would take some technology, and that's the cheapest way to do it. And our trucking, we've hired people to do our trucking, to take our crops to Eddyville or Des Moines. So, that's the best way if you're small to do it, instead of buying a truck or a semi or buying your own sprayer and stuff. There's always people who'll do it for you if you pay them. So that's how we're getting by.

Heather Libby:

Well, that's good. That's encouraging, inspiring. And I know I've followed some of your son's writing, so hopefully we'll be able to get him for his own separate interview, too.

John Jordan:

Yes, he's kind of embraced the CRP. He's got some ground in the Conservation Reserve Program. And he's got pollinator things seeded down, so he's trying to help the birds and the bees. And he's got some owl boxes out to try and get the owls to reestablish themselves.

Heather Libby:

Nice.

John Jordan:

And we both use pretty much no-till farming. We try to conserve the soil the best we can. We don't overspray anything unless we have to. So we're trying to save on that.

Heather Libby:

So how common is that, in your experience, nowadays? Are you the norm, or-

John Jordan:

Well, nowadays, I don't hardly know my neighbors who farm, because there's not any neighbors around me that farm. It's all rented out to people that I don't really know.

Heather Libby:

Gotcha.

John Jordan:

So I know a lot of airplanes have been flying over here this last couple weeks spraying stuff on the ... It goes all over.

Heather Libby:

I was going to say, does that affect yours?

John Jordan:

I don't want to myself, but still, when you spray it in the air, you don't know where it's going to land.

Heather Libby:

Right, right.

John Jordan:

But yeah, and my sister, she farms, her and her husband farm. And her son farms over by Attica. And there aren't too many people my age that's still farming. A lot of people didn't make it through the '80s with the farm crisis. A lot of people wanted to, they had to just sell out. And I guess they couldn't live as cheap as we did. I was on food stamps and I was in the cheese line when the government gave away cheese. And I was on energy assistance to heat our house in order to get by. We didn't have no money. I didn't pay any income tax. I didn't have nothing to pay; didn't make any money to pay any income tax on for several years. That was that bad. I mean, it just took all of our money just to keep the farm, but we did, and it's worth it. Now we've got something that's worth something, anyway. Price of farm ground's gone up.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, that's encouraging to hear, that you had the fortitude to get through that, and that you still can share the message that it's worth it. So that is encouraging. Well, are there any other final memories that you'd want to share, anything we didn't have a chance to touch upon?

John Jordan:

Oh, well, it was a good way to grow up. Your folks just told you to do it, so you just went and did it. You didn't get any, "Congratulations. Hey, that was a good job," or nothing. You were just expected to go do the chores, go rake the hay or go mow the hay. And you were on your own. You learned a lot by just watching, and then you just did it. That was the way it was back then. And there was no concern about somebody getting hurt. I mean, you were on your own to watch yourself. I used to help neighbors put up hay a lot. That's when everything was square bales. And I did a lot of standing on the hayrack, catching bales and stacking them, and then stacking them in a barn for about \$1 an hour or less.

Heather Libby:

That's hot, itchy work for \$1 an hour.

John Jordan:

It was hot. It was hot. But that was the way we lived then. I mean, that was pretty good money. We had some money to go out on weekends and have some fun. But I wasn't in sports or anything in school, because my dad said, "You got to be home to do the chores." And then we lived on a mud road. It was awful hard to go somewhere lots of times. It was impractical sometimes. You just stayed home.

But we survived, and we have a lot of memories, my sister and my brother. And we talk about the life we had on the farm. And it was really simple, but we had a lot of fun out there too. We were not real close to anybody. There was probably a half a mile to the first neighbor on both sides. It was within walking distance, but they had kids too, but everybody was working. So we weren't driving motorcycles and stuff up and down the road. We did our bicycles sometimes.

But yeah, that was kind of the way we grew up. And then when I came back from the Army in the '80s or '70s, things had changed an awful lot from the late '60s to the early '70s. It was unbelievable. It was a different world when I came back to the United States. It was a completely different world. Had to do a little adjustment.

Heather Libby:

I imagine. Yeah, it was a tough time. Thank you for doing that for us, though.

John Jordan:

But that's about what my life was like. I had to work off the farm most of my life, and I still am; don't have to, but I do it. Just a habit, I guess, you know?

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Well, it sounds like you've had a great time on the farm, and that you've done an excellent job teaching the next generation and passing that on. And so, we're grateful for that. Thank you so much for being willing to share your experience. This was a really fun conversation.

John Jordan:

You're welcome. I taught my son a lot about farming, and he thanks me for it a lot, because he learned a lot.

Heather Libby:

Oh, great.

John Jordan:

And we did carpenter work too. I was a carpenter, so he learned how to build things and work on things. And yeah, he's self-sufficient.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. That's great. All right, well, thank you so much. I'm going to end the recording now.

John Jordan:

Okay.