

Interviewer:

Okay. Let's get started. If you could start by telling me your name, your birth year, where you live, and if you lived anywhere different in your life.

Jan Martin:

Okay. Jan Martin, and I was born in 1950, live south of Ames now. I grew up in Webster County in a little itty-bitty town called Callender, which is southeast of Fort Dodge.

Interviewer:

Okay. And how long would you say you spent there?

Jan Martin:

18 years.

Interviewer:

Okay, so the whole shebang.

Jan Martin:

The whole time, yeah.

Interviewer:

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

Jan Martin:

My grandparents farmed, and I don't know for sure, but I'm assuming my grandfather's father also farmed too, so we carried on. Generation of farming ended with my dad. My brother didn't farm, and like I told you earlier, I couldn't wait to get off the farm.

Interviewer:

Do you know if there was anybody before your great-grandfather?

Jan Martin:

No, I do not.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Jan Martin:

One of those questions I wish I would've asked and didn't.

Interviewer:

Yeah. The farther back you go, the harder it is to find that kind of stuff.

Jan Martin:

It is, to get that information.

Interviewer:

All right. Number two, what is your favorite story about growing up on the farm?

Jan Martin:

Well, I can't say that I really liked it. I had a lot of friends. They all lived in town. They got to bike to the movies and bike to events and play together. I have two favorite memories, and I had to really think about finding those for this interview. One was, I can remember my grandmother and I sitting outside under a shade tree, playing games and just visiting and doing fun things. And the other good memory I have is meeting a girlfriend of mine that lived about a mile away, and we'd pack lunches and our diaries and get on our bicycles and go for the day. No cell phones, no check-ins, and we'd be back in time for supper, and that was always a good memory.

Interviewer:

I bet. How old were you, would you say when you were doing that?

Jan Martin:

Oh, 10, maybe 11. Something I would not let my kids or my grandchildren do now.

Interviewer:

I think that's definitely one of the good things universally about growing up on a farm, just being out in the open. Despite all the chores.

Jan Martin:

Yes.

Interviewer:

What kind of crops did your family grow?

Jan Martin:

They grew everything. We did hay, we did corn, we did beans, alfalfa, soybeans. At that time, everybody farmed all kinds of crops and raised all kinds of animals.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It's very, very versatile from what I've been seeing.

Jan Martin:

It was. And now you see people specializing in just a couple crops, or maybe they raise cattle or they raise hogs. They don't do everything.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Yeah. You drive out on the highway and it's either corn or soybean.

Jan Martin:

Right.

Interviewer:

There's not much variation.

Jan Martin:

Yes. That's very true, yeah.

Interviewer:

I think it would be a little more interesting if there was, driving between cities.

Jan Martin:

Because I wasn't that positive by then, looking at the difference.

Interviewer:

What about animals? Now that you mention it, what kind did your-

Jan Martin:

We had everything. They raised cattle. First we had... Oh, the red ones, heifer... What are those called? Oh, I can't remember. Then we did Angus, we had hogs, we had sheep, we had chickens. So a wide variety of animals. I hated the chickens the most. That was one of my jobs, was gathering eggs, and we had to wash them and sell them. I just hated that. I also remember my grandmother out there with a chicken in her hand, de-heading the chicken. I'm sure you've heard that story already.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It flops around for a while?

Jan Martin:

Right. Blood everywhere. And this chicken running around on the ground for a while.

Interviewer:

I've never seen it happen, but I think it'd be like a really-

Jan Martin:

It grosses you out at first.

Interviewer:

I think it'd be a real life-changing experience.

Jan Martin:

Yes. It looks like something out some of the horror movies, the Elm movies that you see.

Interviewer:

It's important for brain development-

Jan Martin:

Do you think so?

Interviewer:

... that you grew up in the Midwest.

Jan Martin:

I don't know. We always had to... Then they dip them in boiling water to get the feathers off, and then we always had fried chicken that night for supper, and I just could hardly eat it.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I was going to ask, was it worth it?

Jan Martin:

Everybody else seemed to like it, but I just had a hard time. I remembered those chickens running around with their heads cut off.

Interviewer:

I don't think I could do that myself, or I'd really have to work myself up to do it, because I've held chickens. They're so soft, and they get very, very docile once you just hold them.

Jan Martin:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So I don't think I could do that.

Jan Martin:

I don't think I ever grabbed hold, or sometimes they would do an ax and cut the head. I don't remember that I participated in that part of it, but just watching was enough.

Interviewer:

Ooh.

You are the first person I've talked to, I think, if I recall correctly, that had sheep.

Jan Martin:

Ah!

Interviewer:

Nobody has had sheep yet.

Jan Martin:

Huh!

Interviewer:

I forgot. Did you say you had goats?

Jan Martin:

No, we did not have goats. Yeah, just sheep.

Interviewer:

Okay, gotcha. All right. Did you raise any of your own food? Did you keep it?

Jan Martin:

Yes. Good beef, good Angus beef, the chickens, the pigs... The sheep, I know they sold the wool, and to be honest with you, I'm not sure what happened with the sheep. I'm assuming they sold it to somebody else, because I don't remember us eating lamb, per se.

Interviewer:

Oh, what was I about to ask? Crops. Did you eat any of those on your own?

Jan Martin:

Yeah. Rice, sweet corn.

Interviewer:

Any, like-

Jan Martin:

The other crops would be more for the animals.

Interviewer:

Any other vegetables-

Jan Martin:

Oh, yes.

Interviewer:

... that you grew-

Jan Martin:

That grew big-

Interviewer:

... on site just for you guys?

Jan Martin:

... big vegetable garden. Yeah. Never heard of a farmer market, back then. I mean, we're talking '50s and '60s. Everybody ate everything, and if they couldn't eat it fresh, they canned it. Didn't freeze it, but they canned it. Canned everything.

Interviewer:

I do love that idea, just being completely self-sufficient like that. I think-

Jan Martin:

It's a lot of work.

Interviewer:

It is a lot of work. But I think the ultimate dream for a lot of people I know that are my age and younger are to move to the middle of the woods and start a vegetable garden, and-

Jan Martin:

We're kind of coming full circle in our thoughts here. And I remember we had no air conditioning, and if you're canning things, you're boiling water in your kitchen to sterilize.

Interviewer:

Oh, so it's all-

Jan Martin:

Because these were glass containers, not ones you bought at Target, not that kind of thing. Cooking all those vegetables, it was a hot job, and I think a lot of work, cutting kernels off the corn, whatever else they were cutting, to freeze it... Or not freeze it, can it, excuse me.

Interviewer:

Any lost fingers?

Jan Martin:

Not that I know. Well, they must have been pretty good at it.

Interviewer:

I'm always scared to dice vegetables because I know I'm... It happened yesterday, I had a little slit in my thumb because I was cutting strawberries,

Jan Martin:

I have a hunch, knives back there weren't as good as what we have now, and I think they probably could only sharpen them on that belt that grandpa would've sharpened his razor on or something.

Interviewer:

Was it a moving wheel or was it a block?

Jan Martin:

No, it was like a strap, and they would just flick the knife down that to-

Interviewer:

Yeah, because now I'm sure you can buy mechanical wheels and you just hold the blade over it and it'll sharpen it, just-

Jan Martin:

Or you take it back to the kitchen store and they sharpen it for you.

Interviewer:

Ooh. If you're feeling fancy.

Jan Martin:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So what kind of work did you do on the farm? You discussed a few of your own personal chores.

Jan Martin:

Yes. I had a lot of weeding to do in the gardens. My job was the chickens. I had to feed them, collect their eggs, and wash them and box them up. Back in the '50s, you walked the beans and the cornfield for weeds. You didn't spray, you didn't ride buggies and spray it. So we had to manually pull weeds or hoe them.

Interviewer:

Sounds like an easy way to get lost.

Jan Martin:

Yes. Well, you can't get lost because it's still pretty low when you're walking in. But it's hot and it's wet because you're out there in the morning, so you had to wear long pants and long shirts, couldn't even get a sun tan. All the goals you had back then.

Interviewer:

That mud is very soft and hard to walk through.

Jan Martin:

Yes. It's hard walking.

Interviewer:

I remember I went to Ballard High and I cut through the cornfield one time, and I never did it again because my shoes were just completely destroyed after that.

Jan Martin:

I know. Yeah. No, I hated everything. Isn't that terrible?

Interviewer:

You fed any livestock?

Jan Martin:

No, I had nothing to do with the livestock. My brother had a cow for 4-H, and he supposedly took care of that cow.

Interviewer:

Supposedly?

Jan Martin:

Yeah. Back then, 4-H was different for girls. We didn't show animals, so I didn't have much to do with the cattle unless they got out, or if we were moving them from farm to farm, then we would just run them down the gravel road. Then it was all hands on deck to help do that.

Interviewer:

Yeah, it sounds... So did you do 4-H?

Jan Martin:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

What did you do? What were your things?

Jan Martin:

Well, we could cook. We could do sewing, or we could do refinishing furniture or something like that. Those are the three choices.

Interviewer:

That just sounds like Girl Scouts.

Jan Martin:

Yeah. Kind of boring back then. There wasn't much diversity between the two sexes.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Jan Martin:

Probably some guys should have taken sewing classes or cooking classes too, and that wasn't an option.

Interviewer:

Those are important skills, but-

Jan Martin:

Yeah. Maybe they realized that late and changed their thoughts on that.

Interviewer:

I didn't really grow up in the 4-H/FFA sort of circle. Do they teach those things now, do you know, to both?

Jan Martin:

I think they do. I think the guys, they call them what? Consumer...

Interviewer:

Oh, family consumer science.

Jan Martin:

... life consumer, or something like that. Yeah.

Interviewer:

I took a class that was called that. That's good.

Jan Martin:

I mean, I would love to have taken a class on car mechanics or something, so you could learn basics. That wasn't an option.

Interviewer:

I would've loved to take wood shop or metal stuff for those basic skills, and I could have, but COVID. Alas.

Jan Martin:

Yeah, changed things, anything hands-on you would've missed out on.

Interviewer:

That's what the YouTube how-to videos are for now.

Jan Martin:

I know. Not quite the same. But yeah, pretty helpful.

Interviewer:

So what kind of farm machinery or technology was used? Did you have a combine?

Jan Martin:

Yes. Well, it was something that fit onto the tractor. We live in the country now, and I just watch the size of the machinery...

Interviewer:

I know.

Jan Martin:

... that go by, and it just amazes me. I can remember my dad and grandpa farmed together, and I think they had two tractors, and there was a corn head, or there was a bean combine, and they all fit on the same tractor.

Interviewer:

You had to attach and reattach them?

Jan Martin:

Right. And it just amazes me. And also how unsafe things were back then. Tractors had little wheels on them and why they didn't roll over or turn, I don't know. Farmers had bad equipment to mow ditches, and every farmer mowed ditches. If you lived on a mile, you mowed that whole mile of ditches. And it was just how it was.

Interviewer:

I'm guessing there's been a lot more rules in place at the federal level of how you're supposed to operate these things.

Jan Martin:

Yes, I think so, too. A lot of guys lost their arms or lost digits in some of those equipment accidents.

Interviewer:

I bet they did.

Jan Martin:

So yeah, it just amazes me, the size and the capability some of these machines have. And it also amazes me, like I said, they do one thing and then you put that one away and you get out the next piece of equipment.

Interviewer:

And these are \$100,000, \$200,000 vehicles, which is crazy.

Jan Martin:

And it takes a pretty expensive shed to house some of the size of those things too.

Interviewer:

Exactly. These really, really big company farms, they have these massive warehouses for their vehicles. You get stuck behind them on the highway all the time.

Jan Martin:

I know. Try not to be perturbed at that, because that's my food there that they're working on, so...

Interviewer:

They're usually nice, though. They'll give you the hand signal.

Jan Martin:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But, okay, last question. But real quick. One of my worst nightmares as a kid, just being an Iowan, was falling into a corn silo and hearing all the stories of people suffocating. That horrified me. I've never even been near that situation, but just to think about...

Jan Martin:

Well, I think they have a lot safety mechanisms now, but every once in a while, there's an old one.

Interviewer:

And it'll happen.

Jan Martin:

And it'll happen.

Interviewer:

Creeps me out.

Jan Martin:

My scariest thing were rats on the farm.

Interviewer:

Oh yeah, I bet.

Jan Martin:

Because they didn't have the sheds like we do now. There were corn cribs that had open slats and the corn was shelled and put in there. And I understand anybody that shelled corn had rubber bands or twine around the bottom of their pants so that rats couldn't climb up their leg as they were... No, that's true! So they wouldn't climb up while they were shoveling out this corn.

Interviewer:

Oh, my gosh.

Jan Martin:

So that was always my concern if I had to mow around those buildings, I mowed real fast, because I was scared of those guys. Because I had shorts on. I didn't have any twined to tie around my pant legs.

Interviewer:

I got freaked out by the house centipedes on the wall. I could never even go near it.

Jan Martin:

Don't go to an old corn crib, then.

Interviewer:

Another one I've heard pretty recently is people who have a cranberry bogs, probably not as much around here, but you know how wolf spiders like to hang out in those?

Jan Martin:

Yeah. Ew.

Interviewer:

And once you flood them and start harvesting the cranberries, the spiders will crawl to the tallest thing around, which is you.

Jan Martin:

Which is you. Oh my gosh. And they're big, right?

Interviewer:

They are big. They're yea big. And so whenever I think about the poor kid who decided to work there, I hope that their boss told them about that before they actually went in.

Jan Martin:

I don't think that's Iowa. I don't think the bogs-

Interviewer:

Yeah, I think that's west.

Jan Martin:

Or down south maybe. Wow.

I do have to say, although I really, really hated it when I grew up, I look back on it and I think it probably was a good experience. And we live on an acreage now, and I love it. Just love it. But I'm not 13 years old either, so maybe it's a different mindset.

Interviewer:

I think you can appreciate all that open space-

Jan Martin:

Yes. I love that.

Interviewer:

... without the work, without the grueling work and being 13 and tiny and easily worn out.

Jan Martin:

I know. Teenagers don't like to work anyway, right?

Interviewer:

No, they don't. Speaking from experience, which is kind of a bad thing to say since I'm on the clock right now.

Jan Martin:

I won't tell if you won't.

Interviewer:

It's nice. It's nice working here. There's air conditioning and everything.

Okay, last question. I suppose you answered it at the beginning. How many members of your family are still farming?

Jan Martin:

None.

Interviewer:

None at all?

Jan Martin:

My parents' godson is farming the land.

Interviewer:

Oh, that you had-

Jan Martin:

That we owned, yeah.

Interviewer:

And-

Jan Martin:

No, nobody else.

Interviewer:

What's the relation there? Just like a family friend's son?

Jan Martin:

It was my parents' godson.

Interviewer:

Yes. But how did that title... Why is he their godson is what I'm asking, I suppose.

Jan Martin:

Oh, family friends.

Interviewer:

Yeah. That's kind of cool that he took it up.

Jan Martin:

So it's kind of like, it's not ours, but yet, I kind of feel... Mike still sends me pictures of the farming, and he still calls it my dad's part of the farm or something, and I know it's not, but it's a nice thing that he does. So we're still in contact.

Interviewer:

That connection is still there.

Jan Martin:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I like that.

Jan Martin:

Yeah, I do too. Big time. Nice guy.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Well, all right. That's all of the questions that are on the form.

Jan Martin:

Well, thank you.

Interviewer:

Yeah, thank you.

Jan Martin:

How many people did you get that responded to do a-

Interviewer:

You're the fifth? Fourth or fifth person.

Jan Martin:

Is that all? Oh, that's too bad.

Interviewer:

Well, we have a few more coming in and they'll probably keep signing up. We hope so. But nonetheless, we really appreciate it.

Jan Martin:

Oh, my pleasure.

Interviewer:

Thank you for taking the time.