

Heather Libby:

Okay, so welcome. My name's Heather Libby. I'm with the Knoxville Public Library, and today I am interviewing Amy. Amy, if you could tell me your full name, where you live, when you were born.

Amy Shinn:

Amy Shinn. I live in Knoxville. I was born 1978.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And so the memories you're going to share with us today about growing up on an Iowa farm, are they about growing up on a farm in Knoxville? Okay.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

All right. So could you tell me how your family came to live on a farm in Iowa?

Amy Shinn:

My dad had an aunt who, when she married her husband, he had a family who, basically they all lived in the same township. And I know you've interviewed some of his family too, but they came in 1850. They went from Scotland and then they came through Ohio, and then they ended up in Iowa. And everywhere from old 92 down, clear, that whole area, all those acres were all their families. And then when they had kids, they would split up the farm or whatever, or sell it to another family member a lot of times.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

So my dad's aunt and uncle, they didn't have any children together. She had a son from a previous marriage and he had, I think two kids that died as infants. And so they didn't have anybody to take over really for them. And then my dad was going to Vietnam and they said if you make it home, basically, why don't you come back and take the farm? Because he was about ready to retire anyways, and I think he was in his 60s at that point, and they were going to move to town.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

So he obviously made it home and then they took over. They had to do a cash rent thing every year. So it was like in my... Well, I guess I should back up a little bit. My aunt and uncle or great aunt and uncle, they moved to town and then shortly after that he died. But it was like a life estate. So every month or every so many months or whatever, we had to pay rent. So we didn't own the farm, but...

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

Your aunt did at that point?

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

Okay, yeah.

Amy Shinn:

And then after my aunt died, then it became just my dad's at that point.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So tell me a little bit about your family. How many of you were there living on the farm?

Amy Shinn:

I have one sister who's four years older than me, and then a brother who is 10 years older than me.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay. You're the baby.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah. And then just my mom and dad.

Heather Libby:

Okay. And about how big was the farm that you lived on? Do you know?

Amy Shinn:

I don't know. There's like 40 acres on this side, and then a little bit up this way, split with the other part of the... So it's like our uncle and then his two brothers, they all own in this great big area and plus their parents, but they'd already passed away. So we had one part here, I guess on the right side of the road, whatever. Then we had one little part on the left side, and then we went up the right side. Then they would come... There's went down this way and then up that way. They all shared the same block kind of-

Heather Libby:

Yeah, everything's kind of parceled up among the extended family, it sounds like.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

That must've made it complicated to know, but it was all kind of in the family.

Amy Shinn:

I know it was at least like 80 acres. But see, we're not technically related to them either, but we always just... I grew up there and we always knew all of them and they were all friends, I guess.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Okay. Well actually that kind of leads us into talking about the people and everybody being friendly. Do you have a favorite story about growing up on the farm or... We'll gladly hear more than one.

Amy Shinn:

I don't know. Not really.

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

Most of the stuff that I remember from being there was just this day for day things. It wasn't really like a specific event or anything. All of our neighbors were mostly elderly people.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

So I would ride my bike down or walk or we had horses so we could ride the horses down there.

Heather Libby:

Jealous.

Amy Shinn:

And well, a lot of the kids on our bus route had horses, so they would... You'd see them walking by your house or riding their horses by, on their horse.

Heather Libby:

Right. Oh, nice. I was on a bus route, I did not have a horse. Well, that's great.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah, so a lot of times I would just go down there and visit with the neighbors and... I don't know. Thinking back, it's like, how did they... I think, man, this little kid's annoying. Why isn't she home with her parents or something? I guess they liked me visiting.

Heather Libby:

So how old were you when you were riding your horse down to the neighbors?

Amy Shinn:

Well, I didn't go by myself.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Amy Shinn:

When I did that, I had to go with somebody, but probably... When I got my own pony or whatever, I guess I was, what was I? Like second grade.

Heather Libby:

Wow.

Amy Shinn:

So after that.

Heather Libby:

That's pretty little. That's great.

Amy Shinn:

Before that I had to always share. So I don't know.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Okay. Well, let us know if anything else pops in your mind, like you got into trouble with your brother and sister or something.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

But let's talk a little bit about what your family grew on the farm. Did you grow any crops?

Amy Shinn:

They had corn and beans, and sometimes they would rotate. One year they would do one and then the other. And I know they had hay, just a bit of hay. I think that's about it really.

Heather Libby:

Right. It's kind of standard for around here. Any animals?

Amy Shinn:

Yeah. Different times we had different ones, but we usually... I guess I shouldn't say we usually, but most of the time we always had cows. And then sometimes we had pigs, and sometimes we had horses. And when I was older, I lived there too. I moved back to the farm.

Heather Libby:

Oh, okay.

Amy Shinn:

So I lived on a different farm in between. And then I moved back to the farm. And then that was when my-

Heather Libby:

As an adult after?

Amy Shinn:

Mm-hmm.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

And then that was when I had my son there with me and he was in 4-H. And so we had sheep there, and I had never worked with sheep before that. That was weird, but it's a big change.

Heather Libby:

They're really stupid. We didn't live on a farm, we lived on an acreage. But yes, my brother and sister did farm goats and sheep for 4-H. So I know a little bit about that. And I know that they can be fun, but they're really stupid, at least the ones we had were. Okay. So were these small operations of animals? You didn't have a feedlot or anything like that, did you? Well, no, you did.

Amy Shinn:

Well, we did kind of have. I mean, it wasn't huge, like a factory farm or something, I mean it was... And I don't even know exactly how many we would have. It seemed like a lot when I was little.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Right.

Amy Shinn:

But we had a feedlot that they would hang out in and their water was in there and everything, and then they could go out into the pasture.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

And then other times after they combine, they'd open up the fence and let them out there and they'd go pick up the corn and eat it.

Heather Libby:

Okay, yeah.

Amy Shinn:

That kind of thing. So it was a big area. Well, actually we rented pasture too, so we did have another pasture over by Attica that my dad used to rent down there.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

It seemed like a lot. I hated when they used to get out because at night they would come wake you up middle of the night and say, the cows are out again.

Heather Libby:

Oh.

Amy Shinn:

So you'd go outside in your nightgown and you'd have a flashlight and you'd put on dad's big coat and you just stand out there and wave your arms. See, just stand in the middle of the road so that the cows, when they go get them and start running them back towards the gate, that they wouldn't just go past it and go down the road. So you'd have to stand out there and try to herd them in.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

It was really... And it was always in the middle of the night when they got out, it seemed like. It was never in the daytime.

Heather Libby:

I don't know if that's a favorite story, but it's a good story.

Amy Shinn:

It happened a lot.

Heather Libby:

Oh, that's too bad.

Amy Shinn:

If you'd lock your fences and do things ahead and prepare.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Amy Shinn:

It probably doesn't happen as much, but it happened to us all the time.

Heather Libby:

I don't know, maybe you had just one particularly wily cow who was-

Amy Shinn:

No, it was a lot of them, there was a lot of cows. They all follow each other. So once one got out, they'd all get out.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Got you. All right, well, how about food? Did you guys raise any of your own food?

Amy Shinn:

My mom had a garden. My grandpa would come out with a rototiller and every year, sometimes you'd get a little bigger and sometimes it wasn't. But she'd grow tomatoes and cucumbers and green beans and probably other stuff too, that I didn't eat, maybe I didn't like. I don't know. But I didn't have to do much with it. I remember having to sit outside and snap the beans apart-

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Amy Shinn:

... But other than that, I wouldn't normally.

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

Maybe I had to water it some nights, but I didn't have to do much with it.

Heather Libby:

Right. Did that constitute a large part of your diet, what your mom grew in the garden or...

Amy Shinn:

Nah, it was more just to have extra stuff in the summers like that.

Heather Libby:

Sure. So what about canning and freezing? Did that happen much or was it-

Amy Shinn:

Sometimes.

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

I remember my dad trying to make ketchup one time. That was a big deal.

Heather Libby:

Oh. Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

But then they made salsa one time too. But that was when I was a teenager though, not when I was a kid, really.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

When I was little we didn't do as much. My grandma used to can meat, which I thought was really kind of gross. So I know you can can a lot of things.

Heather Libby:

I might be with you on that one. Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

I understand the need and it's great that the technology exists, but yeah. Well, who did what kind of work on the farm?

Amy Shinn:

My brother did a lot of work. I didn't get to do a lot of work 'cause I was the youngest, and so a lot of times my dad was just worried I was going to get hurt or that girls can't do certain things.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

That was always a big thing. So my mom used to milk the cows, and that was before I was born and when I was a baby though. And then my dad probably did most of the other stuff.

Heather Libby:

I know a lot of the people that I've spoken to, they had to work other jobs off the farm as well. Was that the case with your parents as well?

Amy Shinn:

Yeah, especially it was, I don't know, the beginning of the 80s, I suppose, but it was my mom. I remember when looking through the newspaper, I used to read the... My dad used to have me read the paper with him all the time, so I remember him finding this ad in there about the VA hiring secretaries. And so my mom got a job at the VA. She had worked there right out of high school, before she had my brother and everything. And so she went back to work there. And then my dad was a truck driver and then still had to do farming stuff and take care of the cows.

Heather Libby:

I was going to say, that's got to be difficult to work around farming or farming around that.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah, my brother had to pick up a lot of that.

Heather Libby:

Got you.

Amy Shinn:

And do it around school and everything.

Heather Libby:

Now, when you moved back as an adult, did you do more on the farm? Was it still an operational farm at that time?

Amy Shinn:

He still had cows and... Well, they had moved, they built a new house and so they actually had another farm that over there they only had horses and sometimes sheep and stuff when we were in 4-H for the kids, but they still had the cows and then we had sheep there that were technically supposed to be ours, but then they had to help us with them too.

Heather Libby:

Sure.

Amy Shinn:

The cows, sometimes they would get out and I'd have to do something or people would stop and tell you they're out.

Heather Libby:

Still?

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

But I didn't have to go out there and run water for them or anything like that really. They're supposed to have a guy that they paid to come do all that, but I still had to do things once in a while that were-

Heather Libby:

Well, sure. 'Cause you're there.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah. If I saw something or one of them had its head stuck in the fence or something, I'd go out and try to fix it or whatever. I didn't call somebody to come over, I'd just go do it.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Okay. Do you know what kind of farm machinery or technology was used?

Amy Shinn:

Probably not a lot. They were pretty primitive, I think. So at one time we had a really fancy tractor, but it didn't last very long. And then this time we had older tractors and we had a John Deere planter one time, I don't know. And he had a disc and they had a hay rake I guess. I don't know if all of it was his or some of it was borrowed. It seemed like a lot of the things we had were older and broke a lot. So I don't know. We had wagons, I guess the gravity wagons and stuff, but we didn't have anything really fancy.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Did your dad have to do the repairs himself or...

Amy Shinn:

I remember going out to Lesters and buying parts all the time and stuff. I don't know.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Well, it's good. I know. Well, then you were the baby and you weren't doing as much.

Amy Shinn:

Yeah.

Heather Libby:

You might not have been up on all of that. Is anyone in your family still farming today?

Amy Shinn:

My dad still has a lot of horses where he's at now at their farm.

Heather Libby:

Oh.

Amy Shinn:

And my brother did. For a long time he had cows and now he sold most of them. But we rent a pasture actually from the people that were our neighbors over there at the other farm.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

So I have one horse and he has three horses there and I have one cow and he has three cows there and that's all we have over there.

Heather Libby:

Okay.

Amy Shinn:

But I go over every day and run their water and break the ice out right now anyways.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

And he takes the hay over for them. So I mean it's very small I guess-

Heather Libby:

Sure. Are you still on the actual farm?

Amy Shinn:

No.

Heather Libby:

No. Oh.

Amy Shinn:

I lived there until... Let's see, my son was probably 13 or 14 and then I bought a house that we move... Not too far from it, and it's in the country and it's a couple acres, but it's not a farm, so it's just a house.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

I tried to, in the beginning I was going to put up a fence and bring my horses over and stuff and that just didn't actually end up working out.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Sounds like you're still kind of continuing that tradition of the loosely related families all living in the same neighborhood, so that's neat. All right, well is there anything else that you were hoping to be able to talk about today that we haven't touched upon yet?

Amy Shinn:

I don't know. Well, like I said, I didn't do a lot of work on the farm, so most of the stuff I remember... I painted, I guess sometimes we had to paint buildings or something like that.

Heather Libby:

Oh, yeah.

Amy Shinn:

Or go out and run water. But I got the easy way out on that, I suppose 'cause I was the youngest. But most of the things we did, I remember playing in the barn all the time, that was like... The whole upstairs was all... In the center was there was a hole where the ladder would come up and then everything else was all big solid floor. And then there was a place where you'd step down in the back and then that would go up to, if you'd throw the hay down for the cows.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

But that whole upstairs was really the only place that we had that was flat on the farm.

Heather Libby:

Oh, really?

Amy Shinn:

So we had a basketball hoop up there and stuff. We used to play basketball and we used to go up and swing on the ropes. That was a thing we did all the time.

Heather Libby:

Oh, that's fun.

Amy Shinn:

Probably wasn't the safest thing, but we always did that.

Heather Libby:

Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

I would never jump out the door, but my sister and her friends, they'd just jump out the back door.

Heather Libby:

And what did they land on?

Amy Shinn:

Just the dirt. But they thought it was funny to make fun of me 'cause I wouldn't want to do it, but I was too little. I didn't want to get hurt.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

I don't know.

Heather Libby:

That's definitely fun.

Amy Shinn:

I mean, we had a basketball hoop outside, but everything was bumpy and dirt, so you couldn't dribble.

Heather Libby:

Right.

Amy Shinn:

You could just shoot.

Heather Libby:

Just shoot. Yeah.

Amy Shinn:

But I don't know, that's about the only thing. I used to swim in... We used to have a little stock tank behind the barn too, that we made into a little swimming pool.

Heather Libby:

Oh, yeah.

Amy Shinn:

I mean, it wasn't like a huge regular swimming pool, but you could go sit in it. It had water in it.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, that must've been a thing-

Amy Shinn:

Better than nothing.

Heather Libby:

'Cause I remember doing that maybe at Dandy's Farm when I was little. I have a memory all of a sudden. You prompted it in me of swimming in one of those. Yeah. That's fun. Did you have a sense of your upbringing on the farm being different than say the kids in town or anything like that, or...

Amy Shinn:

I didn't notice it probably at the time, but now it's like, yeah, it was probably a big difference.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Okay. Well those were very great memories to share. I really appreciate you taking the time to come down and talk to me about them and to share them more broadly so that we can record this important history about growing up in farms in Iowa.

Amy Shinn:

Thank you.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, thank you.