

Heather Libby:

Okay, here we go. All right. I am Heather Libby, with the Knoxville Public Library. I'm here to do a farm interview with, if you'll introduce yourself, please.

John Hogeland:

I'm John Hogeland. I farm west of Lovilia, Iowa, about eight miles, in Union and Cedar Townships, right on the border, basically with Marion County and Monroe County, in Monroe County.

Heather Libby:

Okay. John, do you mind sharing with us when you were born?

John Hogeland:

I was born in 1968, in October. I started going outside very quickly, and my mom said that all the next summer I would go outside, and before I went out, I'd put on all my winter clothes, insist on putting on my winter clothes. She spent all her time picking them up as I took them off.

Heather Libby:

Shed them layer by layer.

John Hogeland:

Out in the yard, because it was too hot.

Heather Libby:

Right. Okay. If you could, tell me about how your family came to live on a farm in Iowa, if you know that history.

John Hogeland:

Our family farm was purchased by my great-great-grandfather in the late 1860s. He had been a surveyor for the railroad coming, and he had lived in Indiana, became a surveyor, surveyed for the railroad, came through Iowa. On his way out, I think he surveyed out through Nebraska. At that point, he got paid out and he came back, and he thought this was a good place to live, so he bought land here. He contacted his family, and they moved out here. We've lived here since the late 1860s/early 1870s.

Heather Libby:

Okay. You are sharing memories of growing up on your family's farm. Do you have a favorite story, or favorite stories is even better about growing up on the farm?

John Hogeland:

We never had very much money. It was tough. I grew up largely in the late seventies and eighties. I went and lived through the farm crisis, but it was always a beautiful place, and we always had plenty of food, having our own livestock and things. I grew up cooking with my mom and working with my dad out on the farm, and we had lots of cats and dogs. Those are my best memories. I've got single memories, but-

Heather Libby:

I should ask, do you have siblings?

John Hogeland:

I have two older sisters. They were just enough older than me to not be remotely interested in playing with me when I was little, except at one point, I guess we played doggy, and they got a string and tied it around my neck and just about choked me. Mom liked to tell that story, that she found me just in time.

Heather Libby:

Good.

John Hogeland:

But it might explain a few things. I have two older sisters. One lives on the farm now, although she does not farm, and my other sister lives in western Illinois.

Heather Libby:

How large was the farm? I don't recall if you shared that yet.

John Hogeland:

Our family farm is about 530 acres.

Heather Libby:

So you had a lot of space to roam.

John Hogeland:

Yeah, the entire area was my playground. We were far enough out in the country that we really didn't have any neighbors who were very nearby to play with. I spent a lot of time out on my own, going up and down the creeks and through the woods. Logs to turn over, rocks to pick up, that was what I spent my time doing.

Heather Libby:

That's a common theme that I've noticed in some of the interviews I've done with children who have spent a fair amount of time outside and were given a lot of freedom to run around, and that sparked something in them.

John Hogeland:

When I started walking, my mom was always worried about where I was. My dad had put up a pen for a bottle calf, and the bottle calf, he wound up selling it, and then mom was complaining because I was always off on my own, so dad decided that would be a good place to put me. It was in the front yard.

Heather Libby:

In the pen.

John Hogeland:

That was going to be my playpen. He put some toys out there, and put me in it, and I immediately started to climb over the fence, because I wasn't staying in any pen. He picked me up and put me back in there, and that went on for quite a while. I got a few swats, and he got mad, and eventually, he stomped off and I climbed out of the pen. I went on my way, and he went on his way, and that was the end of the pen in the front yard.

Heather Libby:

That's a good story. I like it. Can you tell me a little bit more about the crops that your family grew?

John Hogeland:

Well, we always raised hogs and cattle. Crops actually, we raised corn and beans, but dad always was someone who experimented with things. He would plant oats, a couple of years he planted wheat, grain, sorghum, things like that. He was always seeing what other markets were out there, but the main things were corn and soybeans.

Heather Libby:

That's not particularly common, is it, to grow wheat and sorghum? I haven't heard that.

John Hogeland:

No, around here wheat usually doesn't do that well. The climate is changing, and it's getting drier, so it may be something we should be switching to, but corn and soybeans are king. I no longer do any row cropping, but that was what we grew when I was growing up.

Heather Libby:

Well, I'd like to return to that later, since you are still farming, on some of the differences. All right, something to look forward to. You mentioned that you did raise livestock.

John Hogeland:

Yeah, we always raised hogs. When I was little, we were raising them out in the pasture. We'd farrow out in the pastures. Dad was pretty forward-thinking, and he put up a small farrowing house, which he farrowed his sows in, to be more efficient. And then he was actually part of one of the first hog confinement buildings in the United States. When they were up and running, they were one of the largest hog producers in Iowa. It wasn't very long before they were small potatoes, and within seven or eight years they had already been far out outstripped. We had a building on our farm that would hold, I think around 500 head, and there were a lot of neighbors who were pretty displeased, because pigs, at one point, were always considered to be a mortgage lifter. You could always count on pigs making a little bit of money. Cattle were up, cattle were down, corn and soybeans were up and down, but pigs always made some money. When confinement systems came in, that was the end of pigs as a way to make money on a smaller farm.

Heather Libby:

Why was that? Well, just because you were out sold?

John Hogeland:

Well, there's a bunch of reasons. You can't raise nearly as many pigs out on pasture as you can in a building where they're confined. They probably tend to grow faster as long as they don't get sick in the buildings. It got to the point where we had one neighbor who raised a lot of pigs. He raised them out in the woods. I remember my dad talking to him, he was quite a bit older than my father, but he told my dad that the processing facilities wouldn't even buy his pigs anymore because they weren't always uniform, and they'd been raised outside. They didn't want them, they wouldn't buy them.

He was very angry about it, and mad at my dad, but dad saw an opportunity and he took it. Luckily, he got out before things completely fell apart. It was something that, I don't know if he regretted it, but I know I saw a huge change in the quality of life for the hogs. I saw how damaging it was to his health because he was breathing a lot of dust and fumes all the time, which is something I am glad that I'm not doing now.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Okay, can you tell us a little bit about-

John Hogeland:

Oh-

Heather Libby:

That's okay.

John Hogeland:

I was going to say, we also raised cattle. We've always raised cattle.

Heather Libby:

And that was on the same scale, smaller scale?

John Hogeland:

Just like everyone else, originally, we raised fat cattle all the way through. You would feed out the calves. As people started to put up silos, dad was one of the first people to put up silos also, and he made a little bit of money, but down here, you can't grow enough corn, really, to fatten cattle. He lost a bunch of money along with all the neighbors, especially during the early eighties, and he very quickly decided that wasn't the way to go. Instead, he would background calves, which means he would raise them up to around 500 or 600 pounds, then he'd sell them to somebody who had a lot of corn, to a feedlot, basically. That's another thing we've changed, but that was the way he made a living out there, as much as he could, anyway.

Heather Libby:

All right. Well, can you tell me a little bit about whether or not you raised any of your own food? Did you garden? Did you can?

John Hogeland:

Well, by the time I was around, we were making enough money to have our own beef and pork butchered. I remember my mom telling me, I wanted to get a deer, I wanted to shoot a deer, and she

said, "Well, you're not putting it in our freezer," because when she and dad had gotten married, that's what they lived on, deer, and she was so sick of deer. She said that there was no more deer. When they were starting out, that's what they ate, but then we had pork and beef, and I used to get so tired, I was like, "Do we have to have steak again tonight? Do we have to have pork chops again tonight? Can't we have a pizza. Can't we have some Spaghetti-Os, or something like that?" I didn't know how good I had it.

Mom always had a garden. She would grow strawberries and tomatoes, and cucumbers and things. She always liked to pick things that she didn't know much about, and one year she grew some Thai bird's eye chilies, and it was way too hot for any of us. That same year, she grew zucchini. None of us liked zucchini, and the zucchini got to the size of, they were three feet long. It got to the point where we had so many of them that we'd take them and throw them over the fence to the pigs, and the pigs wouldn't even come up and eat them.

Heather Libby:

Seriously?

John Hogeland:

They're like, "Oh god, more zucchini." We always raised a lot of things. Dad would plant a quarter, or a half an acre of sweet corn, and it was always a bit of a nightmare, because always can it in a day, or a day and a half. We'd go out and we would load the entire end loader, or the loader of the track on the tractor with sweet corn. We'd just walk through the field ahead of my dad in the rows, pulling every ear of sweet corn off. You'd fill it up, and then you'd go in and we'd shuck it, and my sisters would take the corn in, and mom would be in there ready to cut corn. They'd cut corn, and dad and I would shuck sweet corn, and then we'd go out and we'd pick more sweet corn. Sometimes we'd do 70, 80, 90 quarts of sweet corn, and then we'd have sweet corn for three years, but it was good.

Heather Libby:

The end product is great, but no, I'm just thinking what a scratchy day, because walking through the rows, and a sticky day, too.

John Hogeland:

The reward was usually being able to go swimming in the pond. After a really hot, awful day, everybody would go up to the pond and swim, and cool off.

Heather Libby:

Oh, that's nice. Okay. Well, it sounds like in this story, everybody was involved on projects such as that. Was there a standard division of labor about how work was divided?

John Hogeland:

Well, to a certain degree, but then again, not. My mom, she had a mild heart condition, so she didn't really work out with dad. Dad did most of the farm work, but then of course, he had kids. He had three kids, he had two daughters and then me, and my oldest sister is six years older than me, so she became the first boy, even though... she is a very hard worker, has always been strong. And then, my middle sister lucked out because she was more petite, and she figured out that she could weasel out of doing all the work. She'd go in and help mom. Dad did have all of us out hauling bales and mowing hay things like

that, but mostly, it fell on my sister Andrea until I became old enough, and then most of it fell on me. That's the life of a farm kid, at least back then.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Did your dad have to hire in help ever?

John Hogeland:

Sometimes he did. He had hired a neighbor kid for a while, and then he hired a gentleman in Lovilia who wanted to do a little bit of farming on the side. My dad was always very interested in trying to help people get going if they wanted to. The neighbor kid, he helped him get started with some pigs. They went in 50/50, and dad ground the feed, and that kid became a farmer later. The older guy, dad would help him farm, and let him use some of his equipment to farm their pieces of ground that he would rent. Dad was always interested in trying to help other people get started if they wanted to. He always told me not to farm.

Heather Libby:

Oh, really?

John Hogeland:

He said, there's just no money in it. Certainly, the way he was doing it, if I was trying to do that still, we probably wouldn't be farming. When I took over the farm... I lived in California for almost 25 years, and I had worked in the restaurant business. I was a chef out there. I was a butcher. I worked in the wine business for a little while, and while I was out there, I was always planning to come back, but I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. For a while, I thought I was going to come out here and plant grape vines. Then I came to my senses on that, but I knew that I didn't really want to farm conventionally.

When my wife and I moved back here, we purchased the cattle herd, and instead of backgrounding cattle, we take them all the way through, but we grass feed and grass finish our animals. They never get any grain. We don't raise any grain. We brought on goats as well, because our herd of cattle, there are a lot of things out in the pasture that cattle won't eat. Mostly, it's because it's thorny, and goats just love that stuff. It's a way to improve your pastures. Goats eat all the stuff the cows don't eat, and the cows eat all the stuff the goats are not that interested in. They're dead end hosts for each other's parasites, so if you run cattle through and then you run goats through, if they pick up any of the cattle parasites, that's out of the system, because those parasites can't survive in goats, and vice versa. If you run cattle through after goats, they pick up the goat's parasites, and those parasites are gone.

It's clearing our pastures, and we have another product to sell, and it's just a lot of fun. We have a big garden that we're selling out of. We sell produce, we forage for mushrooms and other things that we sell to restaurants in Des Moines. That's the way we've decided to go. We're basically more niche farmers, selling most of our beef direct to customers. The goats are going direct to customers, and our produce. I'm teaching classes. We're also doing some-

Heather Libby:

I saw you have a sausage making one coming up soon, right?

John Hogeland:

Yeah, a sausage making class, and then right after that we have a whole animal butchery class. A lot of people are interested in that. My wife teaches writing classes, because a journalist and a writer. We're trying to do agritourism as well. It's a completely different scheme than my dad had.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, I think it's the first that we've heard in these interviews, but it's fascinating to learn about. It's exciting to see that here, too. Let's see. We've touched on a lot. I think this is a good time, given you've started to discuss some of the differences between the farm as it was and now, what kind of farm machinery or technology did your dad use maybe, compared to what you're doing now?

John Hogeland:

Well, I guess the big difference is, he had all the standard stuff. Tractors and wagons, and planters and discs, and harrows and spraying equipment, all of the things that you have to have to be a row crop farmer. I've completely stepped out of that. I've planted all our row crop into hay and pasture, so basically, I need one tractor. Dad bought a new hay conditioner not too long before I took over, and I usually mow my own hay and then have somebody else bale it. By reducing the amount of equipment that we have and need, we reduce the amount of input we have to have, the amount of money that we have invested in massive equipment trying to farm. Basically, I use the tractor for moving bales, and I'm even considering trying to figure out... I've got another system where we could probably move bales most of the time just using our little side-by-side four wheeler, and looking at that, because the less weight you're running over the ground, the less impact you have on the land.

Having a 140 horsepower tractor just to mow some hay and move bales when the cows need bales, it's wasteful, really, but that's what I've got right now, and that's what I'm using.

Heather Libby:

Sure. How did that process go from converting from the row crops to pasture and hay? Was that a difficult, long process?

John Hogeland:

No, it was actually very easy.

Heather Libby:

Was it hard for the soil to recover?

John Hogeland:

Well, the process is very easy, because you just go out and you seed your corn fields and your bean fields down into alfalfa and clover, and grasses. And then that same year, you have hay. Going the other direction is a lot harder, because then you have to start investing in equipment. What was the second part of your question?

Heather Libby:

Oh, was it difficult? Did the soil need to recover?

John Hogeland:

We are seeing a lot of changes in the soil. We've been doing it for, this is our sixth year. You can tell that the soil, the land really appreciates what we're doing. We're getting a lot better growth. I do rotational grazing. My dad, he would turn cattle into a pasture and keep them there until, basically, the fences wouldn't hold them anymore. He was like, "Okay, we're out of feed. The cows are out. Time to move the cows." Then he'd move them to another pasture and do the same thing. I move my cattle, usually daily, and in much, much smaller paddocks. As you do that, it allows the grass to grow back, to recover, where the field that dad had them in, like I said, they'd be in there for three weeks maybe, but you couldn't graze them there for the rest of the year.

If you tried to, it really beat the pastures down. With this rotational grazing, you move them and you move them and you move them and you move them, and in 21 days or 25 days, that grass is ready to be grazed again, and you just keep moving them. It's really been beneficial. We're starting to see a lot more diversity coming back in our pastures. It's a lot better with the cattle, too, because when I first took over, we had some pretty wild cows, and the wildest of them I got rid of, and we brought in some new cows. If you're out there every day with them, and they see you every day, and you're walking around among them every day, you see any problems, but also, they just get used to you.

They know that even if they're not crazy about what they've got today, tomorrow there's going to be something new. "We ate most of it today," and they're looking over the fence, and they're like, "Well, he's going to be here at 8:30 tomorrow morning, turning us into this next paddock." We have a lot less cattle out, and if they do get out, they don't go anywhere. They see you coming, they're like, "He's coming to let us in."

"Well, you already let yourself in, so I'm just closing the gates up." It's a big difference.

Heather Libby:

Everyone in Iowa, whether they grew up on a farm or not, or if they were rural, probably has a story about cattle wandering. We did. We grew up on an acreage, but yeah, there was always a cattle stuck in the woods, or wandering up the driveway.

John Hogeland:

For us, I still have PTSD, honestly, about cattle being out, because you get out... and especially the big fat steers who were over in the feedlot, if they got out, they've been in the feedlot for three months, and all they can see is the grass on the other side of the fence. They get out there, and boy-

Heather Libby:

They're not coming back.

John Hogeland:

They see you, and they weigh 1500, 1600 pounds, and if they decide they're going to run through a fence, they just run through a fence. You'd be out there and you'd be chasing them and chasing them. My dad had a bad temper, and he'd be honking at them, and roaring around in the pickup. Even now, if my sister calls me early in the morning and wakes me up, and says, "These cows are out," I have a rush of adrenaline. "Oh no, the cows are out," and then I get up and I'm like, "It's going to be okay," because my cows, they're pretty calm, and they don't usually take off and run like they used to, when they see me.

Heather Libby:

Great. I think you've spoken to our last question. How many members of your family are still farming?

John Hogeland:

Right now, it's just me. My oldest sister Andrea lives on the farm, and she loves to help me. The thing that she does, she's been planting a lot of trees around the farm. We've been trying to bring back a lot of oaks, things like oaks and walnuts and hickories, the better trees. My great-great-grandfather and my great-grandfather pretty much went through and they cut down all the oak trees, and all of the hard maple trees, anything that was worth money, without any thought of what's coming down the road. Most of the trees on our farm are not what you would consider really high quality trees. We're not necessarily planting them to harvest them. We are planting them because that's what was here originally. We're trying to bring back oak savannas, and hickory. A lot of times, we're part of that... having hard maple trees, they not only add a lot of beauty in the fall, but that's a tree that was cut out because it makes great wood. We're replanting a lot of things. We're trying to bring back a lot of things that have been lost.

We have a lot of prairie seeding. We have actually prairie remnants on our farm that are just coming back, because I don't put the cows on it and graze it into the ground. We're seeing compass plant, and big blue stem, little blue stem, prairie drop seed. A lot of the grasses that are there, you don't notice them because the cows eat them as soon as they get in there, but if you give them a little time to recover, they start to come back. It's a beautiful thing. I'm really, really happy that we're doing this, because I think it's making our land a lot better.

Heather Libby:

All right. Well, is there anything else that you were hoping that we would touch upon that we haven't had a chance to chat about?

John Hogeland:

No, I don't think so.

Heather Libby:

Well, I think we covered a lot of ground.

John Hogeland:

Yeah, around 600 acres.

Heather Libby:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your time today, and also, just for all that you are doing for our community, for our state.

John Hogeland:

Well, thank you for the interview.

Heather Libby:

Of course.