

Heather Libby:

Okay, I think we're going, and we'll leave this here. So, hello, I'm Heather Libby, the adult services librarian with the Knoxville Public Library. And joining me today is Summer. Summer, if you could tell us your full name, where you live now, when you were born, and then also, if you're able to, if the memories you're sharing today are from somewhere other than where you currently live, if you could tell us where they take place.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Sure. So my name is Summer Jordan. I'm now Summer Jordan Wasko, and I live in Altoona, Iowa. I could not leave the state.

Heather Libby:

Did you try?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

I love the black dirt here in Iowa. I couldn't get too far from it. I was born in 1978, and I was born in Des Moines, and shortly after, moved to Knoxville onto the farm that I grew up on.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So can you tell me a little bit about how your family came to live on a farm in Iowa?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

So I was born in 1978, and by 1980, my father's grandparents, so my great-grandparents had both passed, and the farm was a century farm at that time. Had been in the Jordan family for 100 years, over 100 years at that time, was available and my father felt very strongly about moving there and keeping that family farm in the tradition of the Jordan family. So by 1980, we had moved there, and it was about 300 acres. The house that we resided on sat on about 300 acres and still sits there today.

Heather Libby:

And for people who are working their way through some of these interviews, a great thing about speaking to you today is you round out your family's history. We have already spoken with your father, your mother, and your brother. So some of this stuff listeners might already know, but I'm really excited to hear different memories, different perspectives. Okay. So do you have, the question is, what's your favorite story about growing up on the farm? And we can start there, but if that's too overwhelming to pick a favorite, we'll take anything you've got.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

So as a child, one of the things that really stuck out from growing up on a farm was, of course, and this is probably a theme with a lot of farm kids, is the freedom of your days. So when you live away from town and there's a drive involved in getting to town, you don't go into town very often, so the day is yours. We didn't have a lot of appointments or places to go, especially in the summertime when we weren't in school. And so the farm became our lives and our playground, and our responsibility on top of the responsibilities that we had there filled our days, but most of the day was ours. And we were always witness to, there was something being born all the time, and that's an overwhelming theme as a child. We were always following our livestock around, waiting for things to be born.

We had baby chicks at one time, we had baby pigs, we had baby cows, and of course, we always had baby kittens. And so we spent a lot of our days following them around once we found out that they were pregnant and following that, and then sitting with them while they were giving birth and thinking that we were helping them probably at some point. And then watching them grow and playing with them. And I remember doing that a lot. We were always playing with some sort of baby animal in the stage of their development.

Heather Libby:

That's a great memory. I like it.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

And also learning a lot in that and learning a lot of things didn't always survive birth, and so you learn that life cycle and it was a great learning experience.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Did you ever get woken up in the middle of the night to help with anything?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Yes, we did. Yes. So we learned a lot of ways to tell that animals were about ready to give birth. And one of the things I remember with our sows is that we didn't have feral in stalls. So we raised our pigs a little bit feral, ferally. They did their own thing. When they're left to their own devices, sows will often start to gather sticks and build like a nest, like a nest cage, almost to protect themselves when they give birth. So when they started doing that, then we would herd them into a barn and keep them in the barn for when they gave birth. But I do remember waking up in the middle of the night with my dad waking us up and asking us to go out and watch them, and keep an eye on things, and make sure that everything went well.

And, of course, it was very exciting. We didn't mind being waken up for that. And then also assisting my father. Sometimes the cows had trouble giving birth, and sometimes you had to pull a calf, what we called pulling a calf, and if my dad didn't feel like his hands or his arms were too big to get in and help with that, sometimes he would employ us with our smaller hands. And so we did it. He asked us to pull a calf, and that involved, yes, what you could imagine.

Heather Libby:

I know, I got asked to help with the sheep once. But yeah.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Your hand's smaller, get in there. And so, yes, we did. We did on occasion. Not very often. We didn't have a huge amount of livestock. It's just enough to make some money on the side. Our main focus was raising crops.

Heather Libby:

Sure. Well, that's great. That leads us, you're so good at transitions. Can you tell us more about what kind of crops your family grew?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

We raised corn and beans predominantly, and of course, living in Iowa, that was the big moneymaker, and that's what our soil allows us to grow in the most volume. And as we acquired more land and my father continued to buy farms, surrounding farms, we, of course, put things in CRP and allowed them to sit in CRP and recover. And there's a recovery process that goes with that, which CRP is a 10-year span of just allowing them to be in grasses and replenish themselves. We also raised a garden. We raised tomatoes, and we had asparagus and rhubarb that came up every year. And we had an apple tree, and cherry trees, and things like that.

Heather Libby:

Great. So I'm going to jump ahead to that question about raising your own food. So did this constitute a large part of your diet?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

The biggest contribution of our livestock to our daily diet, of course, was our chickens. I do not remember a time when we ever did not have chickens. So we had farm eggs from the time I was born. That was very important to my parents that we had natural, organic eggs to eat. So that contributed the most to our diet. Then we've raised a lot of tomatoes. My mom canned tomatoes. My mom always made delicious homemade pickles. She always did the three-day lime bath, if anyone's aware of that process. So we raised a lot of cucumbers, and we did pickles, and tomatoes, and we did not can our apples. We had a lot of apples, but we didn't can them.

Heather Libby:

So tell us a little bit more about the animals. So we know you might've covered all that. Is there anything that we didn't cover about the animals that you raised?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

We always had cows and, of course raising cows-

Heather Libby:

About how many?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

We always had about 50, 50 to 75 cows. And when you raise corn can always, it's very easy to use some of that to supplement your cow. You're feeding your cows. So you can cut stocks, you can do corn cobs, you can shell corn, and supplement their diet. So it's easy to raise cows. We did raise pigs for about five years. We didn't have a good building farrowing stall set up for pigs. They were very interesting. Anyone that's ever raised pigs on a smaller scale where they all are your pets, there's a lot of similarities between pigs and dogs. And of course, they were all of our pets, and then we always, of course, had chickens.

Heather Libby:

Did that make it harder for you to eat them later or?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

To a certain extent. So the sows that we bred were very much our pets, and then, of course, they had several babies, and they were a little overwhelming once they got to a certain age, there was 15 or 20 of them, we weren't as close to them. It was okay after a while if they moved on to the next step. But the sows were very much our friends, our buddies. Our pets.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So tell us a little bit about the kind of work that was done on the farm, how it was divided up, if it was at all.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Yeah, what's interesting when I reflect on this is my parents were hippies, and my mother was very, very much believer in equality and of course, had a lot of feminist beliefs. And I look back on our childhood, and we actually were pretty traditional in our roles on the farm. I'm not sure if that came out of necessity. I was the eldest daughter, and by the time I was nine or 10, my mom had gone back to work at that point. She did stay home with us in the beginning, but at that point she was working full time, and I was coming home and cooking every night and making dinner during the week while people were at work. And then my brother was going out and doing more of the chores.

I helped with the chores, but he was doing the bulk of the chores, and we kind of divided ourselves like that, maybe more out of necessity. But we did take on some traditional roles fairly early on, and that held through. I was shown how to drive the tractor, and I always helped to mow the yard, help with the garden, and, of course, hay the cows, and feed the chickens, and help dress the chickens, and things like that. But as we got older into our teenage years, my brother took over more responsibility of driving the bigger farm machinery, and I was home. I was inside cooking, I guess, a lot of the time.

Heather Libby:

Having spoken to him, some of his memories at least suggest he had a driving interest in the work. And he's still deeply entrenched in it.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Yes, he is. And I think that's a good point. I think my brother farms now, and I think he did. He had more of an interest in going out and driving some of that bigger machinery. In a bind, in a pinch, though, my dad would come to the house and get me.

Heather Libby:

Would you have preferred to have had anything swapped? You preferred to have done less cooking or is it just need to be done?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

I would say one of the things growing up on a farm that you learned very early on is if something needs to be done, you just do it. And I think that was probably the overreaching theme in that situation. I didn't remember feeling very strongly one way or the other. I was better at cooking. So I probably felt okay doing that.

Heather Libby:

Well, great. What kind of farm machinery or technology was used?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

So we never had anything very modern on our farm. If there's any tractor or combine connoisseurs out there, my father always had an old Gleaner combine. I don't even know if Gleaner is still in production. And I think his was from the late 60s. And if you look at the Gleaner combine today, it is a quarter of the size of what today's combines are. So I can imagine that he had to make several passes on the field to get anything done. Things were a lot smaller back in the day, but he used that old Gleaner combine for many years. He just used some mismatched older tractors and stuff that he'd acquired from his father or from farm sales. We definitely did not have anything that was really technology forward. A lot of things were done manually. I don't remember my dad ever having a post digger. He was the post digger and we didn't ever have any fancy trailers, anything. We had things that were handed down over the years, but we made it work. We made it work.

Heather Libby:

Now, do you remember any of the difficulties? And your parents talked about getting through the farm crisis in the 80s, you were pretty young then. Were you aware of any of those problems?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Of course not. I think children are pretty, we're not probably the most observant, and we don't have anything to compare that to when you're young and you're in the middle of that. We always did have well water. That was a difference from a lot of, of course, other kids that I knew that lived in town. And even some of our relatives that still farmed, they had rural water before we did. We were on well water for a long time, as was our neighbor. Although he did go to rural water first before we even did. So you could say that there was some older traditional things that we kept on the farm that could have reflected being poor and struggling, but we had well water.

Heather Libby:

That might've been what helped get you through the crisis too.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Absolutely, absolutely. We had some things that we could depend on that we didn't have to pay for, so that could have helped us. As I got older, my parents spoke to some of the things that they had to do. They did have to use food stamps back in the day. They did have to get some of the government cheese that everybody talks about. Of course, as a child, I didn't remember any of that. So one thing that we always did is we did a lot of our own cooking. We did not buy very many processed meals. We made a lot of things from scratch. Of course, we had farm eggs to rely on too, and things like that. So that helped.

Heather Libby:

You'd utilize the food co-op, I remember.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

And we went to the-

Heather Libby:

Yes, our parents did that together.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

So the food co-op was available.

Heather Libby:

Did you have to eat carob instead of chocolate?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

We were not subjected to carob. We did have to sprinkle a lot of nutritional yeast on our food. And yes, anyone that's not aware of what the food co-op, you did buy a lot of things in bulk, and that was, of course, very economical and helped a lot with food costs.

Heather Libby:

Cool. And it fits in with the hippie theme too.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Absolutely.

Heather Libby:

How many members of your family are still working today, farming today?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Yeah, so my father and my brother are still farming. And of course, my brother's wife, Beth, helps out, is with farming too with him. So very proud of them for keeping that. And the 300 acres that we initially moved on and living on by 1980 is still owned, of course, by our family. So that century farm has been kept in the family after all these years. So very proud of that.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, that's amazing. Quite an accomplishment. Yeah, that's challenging for a lot of families, I think.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

Yes, absolutely. Yeah.

Heather Libby:

Well, is there anything else that you were hoping we would touch upon today that we glossed over?

Summer Jordan Wasko:

No, I think those were wonderful questions.

Heather Libby:

They are, and thank you so much for your time and your willingness to share your memories for this project.

Summer Jordan Wasko:

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Okay. Thanks, Heather.

Heather Libby:

You're welcome.