

Heather Libby:

Okay, I think we're recording. So I am Heather Libby with the Knoxville Public Library, and I'm here today to do a recording about your memories growing up on an Iowa farm. So would you mind introducing yourself?

Justin Jordan:

Sure. I'm Justin Jordan. I'm 42-years-old. I live on a farm by Lacona, Iowa currently. I grew up on a farm, a Century Farm west of Knoxville when I was younger, and I was born May 6th, 1981.

Heather Libby:

Okay, great. And I suppose for any listeners or people who are working their way through these different recordings on the Iowa Heritage digital website, the Century Farm that you grew up on was the Century Farm of your father who we've already spoken to.

Justin Jordan:

Yes.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, John, right? John Jordan?

Justin Jordan:

Yes, that's true. That's true. So I can speak a little bit of that lineage, I guess.

Heather Libby:

Well, yeah, and that might speak to the first question that I'll ask you is how your family came to live on a farm in Iowa. So we're hitting multiple generations. Go ahead, yes.

Justin Jordan:

So Frederick and Henrietta came from Germany back in the mid-1800s, and they had actually 15 kids, 13 of which survived. And they came to the place west of Knoxville and settled that area and they gave each one of their boys 80 acres. So my father, who would've been the fourth generation from Frederick and Henrietta, had purchased the farm from his grandpa back in the early '80s. So that is where I was born actually, and spent my whole childhood on that farm. So his grandpa had also added an additional 40 acres to that 80. So he actually had 120 acres that he had purchased from his grandpa.

Heather Libby:

Okay. So let's see. I think we can do these pretty much in order, but if we jump around that's fine. Do you have a favorite story or favorite stories about growing up on the farm?

Justin Jordan:

Boy, that is a tough question. I guess narrow it down to stories.

Heather Libby:

Sure. It's better anyway. We'd like to hear more than one.

Justin Jordan:

Yes, that's right. So we weren't a very big family. It was myself and my older sister, Summer, who's three years older than myself. And then of course my parents. My grandpa also farmed, but he farmed over by Pleasantville, so we really didn't share much farm machinery or he didn't really have much interactions with on our farm. So it was mainly just the four of us, and I'm the one who helped primarily with the farm. My sister had other interests, so I did a lot of the farm work with my dad. So I guess I spent a lot of time by myself, because my dad also worked off the farm as a carpenter.

So I would come home after school off the bus and I would do the chores. And then after getting the chores done, we had chickens, hogs, and then cows. So depending on the year, the cows might be out to pasture. So I'd actually, after getting the rest of the chores done, I would go out and check the cows, make sure they were doing fine, make sure we didn't have any new calves, things like that. Some of my fond memories was actually going out and checking the cows. I really enjoyed just being out in nature. We had a dog named Toby that always liked to go for walks. So I really enjoyed getting off the bus, because I really enjoyed being outside. So being cooped up in school all day, it was like, just let me loose. I would just run off that bus and get at it.

Heather Libby:

So about how old were you when you were doing these chores and such on your own? I'm curious about that.

Justin Jordan:

Pretty much, well, as soon as I was old enough to go to school, I was doing chores and things like that. So I was doing some of the easier chores even before school, taking care of the cats and dogs and chickens. I was doing that and collecting the eggs. I was doing that as far back as I can remember.

Heather Libby:

Sure. And wandering around, just you and your dog, on the property. That seems like a nice amount of autonomy and freedom for a young one too. Do you ever get into trouble or?

Justin Jordan:

Well, there weren't too many neighborhood kids to get in trouble with. Like I said, I actually spent a lot of my time, just me and the dogs, and me and the cows, me and the animals, because there weren't really any neighborhood kids. A lot of the farmers in our neighborhood, their children had already graduated from school and things like that. So there weren't a lot of kids in the neighborhood to play with, to get in trouble with either.

Heather Libby:

Sure, sure.

Justin Jordan:

And my personality doesn't lead to mischief activity. I was usually busy getting things done and done and done right, and things like that. But I really enjoyed just being out in nature. I would just kind of spend my time inventing scenarios. I was really into Native Americans. I read all of the Indian books in all of my elementaries I attended and middle school along with all the history books. So I pretty much would read out all of the history and Native American books in every library that I went to school in.

And so I would form just imaginary scenarios where I would be an Indian in the woods. I actually made my own bow and arrow out of string and sticks and would shoot round bales with my bow and arrow pretending like I was hunting buffalo and things like that.

Heather Libby:

I love it.

Justin Jordan:

So I would kind of actually, once the chores were all done, made sure the cows were all good to go, I would actually get lost in my own little world, just out there in the woods doing my own thing and do that for several hours and then come home for supper. My mom worked off the farm, so supper usually wouldn't be until later anyway. So till seven, eight o'clock, I would just be out there living in my own world.

Heather Libby:

That's fun. That's good. So can you speak a little bit about the crops that your family grew?

Justin Jordan:

You bet. They say in Iowa, that corn is king. And so we definitely raised field corn and soybeans, and then we had hay, and then we had pigs, and we had cows, and of course the chickens. The chickens were mainly layers. They did the eggs that we would eat and then we would also do broilers that we would eat. We sold a lot of our grain. Some of our grain went to feeding our livestock, and then all of our hay went to feeding our cows. So we didn't actually sell any hay to anybody.

Heather Libby:

So I think that also we've touched upon the animals that your family raised.

Justin Jordan:

Sorry about that.

Heather Libby:

No, that's great. There's no real way to separate the threads here. It is all kinds. But what's the scale on which you were raising livestock?

Justin Jordan:

You bet. So my introduction, so we had the home farm, which was 120 acres. I'll kind of start with our size of our farm, which kind of leads to your kind of self-supporting. So we had 120 acres there at home, and then we had 80 acres, which we called the Bishop Place, had that from when I was young. And then later on when I was in probably fourth or fifth grade, we bought another 80 acres not too far away from our home farm called the Hill Place. So we were looking at around 280 acres or so of ground, all diverse between pasture, corn, beans and hay on all of them. So we had enough there to support around 20 to 30 cows. And we had about six sows, also for the pigs. And so as for the set amount of acres we had for each crop, I guess I was still young enough that I let my dad worry about those details.

Heather Libby:

Sure, that makes sense. Did you guys garden? Did you raise your own foods? A lot of it? All of it?

Justin Jordan:

We did. Like I said, we did all our own chickens, so we never bought a chicken from the store, never bought an egg from the store. In fact, we sold eggs and actually we even sold butchered chickens. We even tried turkeys for a few years.

Heather Libby:

They're so stupid.

Justin Jordan:

Yep. Yep.

Heather Libby:

And they're good.

Justin Jordan:

They are good, yes. And they do make a mess of a chicken house. Have you ever seen one bumbling around a chicken house knocking over feeders, waters, everything else? Everything has to be nailed down for them if they're in there. But we would have a pretty good-sized garden. We would raise and can all our own tomatoes. We did sweet corn, green beans, peas, radishes, cucumbers, watermelons, cantaloupe.

And then I also would have a portion of the garden that was just my stuff because I like to try just some of the things I wanted to do. So I would have a portion of the garden. I would kind of have my own little corner where I would try some things.

Heather Libby:

Do you remember what you were interested in? That's fascinating.

Justin Jordan:

I did popcorn one year. Which anyone who's raised popcorn, it's all about getting it the right moisture.

Heather Libby:

Ah, tricky. Yeah.

Justin Jordan:

Yeah, it's a learning curve to that. And I tried some white radishes one year. I would just try some different things that I wanted to try. I really liked watermelons, so I would try maybe some different types of watermelons. Black-eyed Susans, not black-eyed Susans, black diamonds, excuse me, black diamond watermelons, some different types of striped watermelons, things like that. Because melons also can be kind of difficult to raise in a way that they're edible.

Heather Libby:

We've never had luck.

Justin Jordan:

Yep. Yep. So yeah, my parents allowed me a lot of freedom. Definitely, as long as I was in by the time it was dark, that's really all they worried about. I would actually walk from our farm to the other farms, which were about two, three miles away just on my own at a very young age. And no one thought a thing about it. I was always a good distance runner, so later on when I started running, I would actually go out and just run six, eight miles around the neighborhood on my own and just not think a thing about us. I mean, my parents just let me live my life as a child, which I'm very grateful for.

Heather Libby:

Great. Let's see. Who did what kind of work on the farm? Again, I think we've touched on this a little bit, kind of the division of labor. You said it was primarily you and your dad. Did you ever have to bring in extra help or how did that work?

Justin Jordan:

Yeah, that is a great question. So like I said, my grandpa who did farm was quite a ways away. So he really didn't share equipment or help out around the farm. My dad was one of those guys who just, if you couldn't do it yourself, you didn't do it. And so we never hired anybody, we never had anybody come in. We were pretty self-sufficient. My dad would do the combining. My dad would do the planting. I usually helped a lot with the hay, and if it wasn't harvest, it would be basically unloading grain or things like that.

The other thing, too, with a lot of my dad's equipment, there was a trick to getting it all going and running. Most of his equipment was on the verge of just running. So that kind of lent also to not having a lot of people come help, because there's kind of tricks to all our farm machinery. And then also same with my dad running some of the machinery just because he knew the tricks to keep it going and things like that. So definitely, it was probably at least 30-years-old before it showed up on our farm. So yeah.

Heather Libby:

That's a way to keep costs down, I imagine, right?

Justin Jordan:

Yes, yes.

Heather Libby:

Compared to the multimillion dollar machinery that's available now. But actually that's not a terrible way to transition into the last couple of questions because how many members of your family are still farming? I mean you are.

Justin Jordan:

Yep.

Heather Libby:

Your dad still is some?

Justin Jordan:

Yes, he still is. I've taken over some of his, but yep, he is still farming.

Heather Libby:

And so can you tell us about where you are farming currently?

Justin Jordan:

I still farm with older machinery, and that is also because I pay cash for my farm machinery. I don't like to borrow money against farm machinery. But that's also for simplicity. There are some advantages of being tech-savvy and having some information that technology gives you as a farmer, and also efficiency that comes with that. I currently own around 500 acres and have a combination of also row crop, pasture, hay and all that. But I still don't have a large enough operation that I can really justify a lot of the technology-savvy equipment.

But with that said, I also am not dependent on internet connection when I farm. I'm not dependent on a satellite connection when I farm. I still basically just rely on mechanical ingenuity to make my farm equipment work, which also makes it easier for me to work on it myself too. So pretty low tech around my farm, but doesn't mean it has to be low information. I still definitely do tissue samples on my crops to let me know where I'm sitting on nutrients in that plant. I do extensive soil sampling.

Just observation is also another way of just making sure everything's running right on your farm. I get out and physically check my planter rather than relying on a computer to tell me that my planter is planning at the proper spacing and proper population. I will actually get out and dig up a section of that row and just verify myself with my own eyes so that that planter is doing its job correctly. And like I said, most of that is by choice just because I don't want to rely on internet or GPS to keep me farming.

Heather Libby:

And you studied, did you study, I mean obviously you have a lot of hands-on experience in education, but did you go to school?

Justin Jordan:

I did not actually. I took FFA in high school and things like that. But as for going to ISU or going to a college for ag, I did not. What's interesting is when I graduated high school, there were a lot of farmers who were still coming out of the '80s, a lot of farmers who were still going broke when I graduated high school. When I graduated high school, corn was a \$1.80. Beans were the high fours, low fives. It was not at all very profitable to be an Iowa farmer when I graduated high school. In fact, I wanted to be a farmer when I graduated high school.

Heather Libby:

Yeah, you found your path early.

Justin Jordan:

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And my dad and I bought a piece of ground right when I was right out of high school. I had worked hard and had about \$20,000 saved up when I graduated high school, but I knew it took a lot of money to run a farm. And the only person who actually encouraged me to farm actually was my father, and I realized I needed to make a bit of money. So I actually went into construction, specialized in HVAC, got my associate's degree from DMACC in that field, and just got right out of the

gate as being a service technician, making good money because I turned around and just took that money and went and invested it in buying farm ground.

So that's kind of the reason for my education outside of farming. I felt like I had a good handle on farming. I felt like I knew what I needed to do. I just needed the ground to apply that knowledge to. So I felt like what I needed when I graduated high school was a good paying job that required a little investment and time. I was just so ready. My senior year, I was just chomping at the bit. I had all that money saved up. I was just ready to cut me loose and take on the world.

Heather Libby:

That's amazing.

Justin Jordan:

So I wasn't in a hurry to spend four years in a classroom again.

Heather Libby:

No, no. Yeah. No, I'm just always curious to know where the farming knowledge and the agricultural knowledge, which obviously is deep, where you got that.

Justin Jordan:

Yep.

Heather Libby:

Okay. Is there anything we didn't touch upon that you were hoping we would be able to talk about?

Justin Jordan:

I guess the only thing I wanted to drive home is just I've done a lot of traveling in my time since I graduated high school. I've seen the pyramids of Egypt. I've sat on the Rock of Gibraltar by the Mediterranean Sea. I've been in Iceland and seen the beauty of that country and flown over oceans, been to islands. Done a lot of traveling, and I really enjoy that. But the one thing is I am always grateful to come back to Iowa, because I was just blessed with the opportunity to just by luck born here and have the ability to be a farmer in Iowa.

Every country I go to, I always like to observe the farming operations in those countries, which I find very fascinating. Like in Iceland, all the farmers, because there's not enough sunlight and heat to cure hay, they actually do hay leach with all of their hay because they just adapt to their environment. In Egypt, the only green strip in Egypt is along the Nile River where they irrigate out of the Nile River to do their farming. And I've just looked all these places I've been and I'm thinking I wouldn't trade my Iowa farm ground for any place that I've been, and I just want to drive home how precious that resource is.

Some countries have oil. Some countries have minerals. And once you drill and pump or mine those resources, they're gone for a very long period of time. We in Iowa are blessed with this beautiful natural resource of soil and that's a resource that, if you take care of it, gives back to you year after year after year. And as long as you protect your climate, you have a beautiful resource that you can enjoy for generation after generation after generation. It's not just you mine it once and done and then you have nothing left.

So I guess I want to drive home, anyone in the future hearing this interview, just how grateful I am of the environment and soil we have in Iowa. And I hope that future generations also find that appreciation in living in this beautiful state.

Heather Libby:

I know you're very busy, but I hope that you're writing a book because you are just such an amazing spokesperson. And we spoke about the simple technology that you use, but you're very involved and you spend a lot of time advocating for sustainable farming.

Justin Jordan:

I do. I do, because I am so grateful for this beautiful place we live that I try to just vocalize that to anyone who will listen because I want to make sure we all understand what we have. Anytime someone has something of abundance, sometimes you take it for granted. And we are very lucky. We have beautiful soil in Iowa and there's an abundance of it today. We have lost some of it. But we need to understand that we have to protect what we have, build what we have, so we can enjoy it and everyone else can enjoy it going forward.

Heather Libby:

All right. I've got nothing to add to that.

Justin Jordan:

Okay.

Heather Libby:

That's amazing. Thank you so much for what you do on your farm, for our community, and for the practice of farming. And thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy schedule to speak with me and to share your stories.

Justin Jordan:

No problem. Thank you.