

BENNIE BLAYLOCK
Blaylock Farm - Winona, MS

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Date: August 18, 2011
Location: Blaylock Farm– Winona, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 35 minutes
Project: Downtown Greenwood Farmers' Market

[Begin Bennie Blaylock Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, August 18, 2011. I'm in Winona, Mississippi, with Mr. Bennie Blaylock. And Mr. Blaylock if I could get you to say your name and your occupation, please, sir?

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Bennie Blaylock: Bennie Blaylock. I'm a hobby farmer, do it for a hobby to keep occupied because I'm getting on up in age a little bit.

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AES: May I ask you what you did before you retired?

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BB: I worked in automotive parts for 43—uh-oh, 43 year, I believe it was, and I retired in [20]02. This is the old home place. Now I'm the only one left, so I just occupy my time on it.

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AES: So your family has been in this area for a while?

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BB: Right. I was born right here where we're sitting in this house. So I've been here until I come to Leland and Greenville [Mississippi], spent those years over there.

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AES: So you moved back here to the home place when you retired in '02?

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BB: Yeah, we live in town. We got this place out here that we going to rent—to sell in Winona and move on, you know, back out in the country at the old home place. That's what our plans are for the future.

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AES: You got a pretty piece of land here. May I ask how many acres are here associated with the home place?

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BB: Forty-five-acre square block. It's all bordered off by highways and roads.

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AES: What was it like before those—those highways were here when you were growing up?

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BB: Well, they used to be dirt road, and now they're black top, but it's been there ever since I remember, the roads have.

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AES: And did your parents buy this place or has it been in the family longer than that?

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BB: Been in the family, a family hand-down.

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AES: Has it always been the same size, as far as acreage?

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BB: Well, no. We used to have land across [Highway] 51, but we sold all it off and now 51 is a boundary line on the east. All the rest of it has been sold off but this block.

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AES: So your parents made their living farming?

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BB: Right.

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AES: What kind of crops did they grow?

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BB: I think most of it was cotton back then—cotton and corn.

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AES: Tell me what you remember from those days growing up.

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BB: Well I got a lot of good family remembrances. I know we used to raise about near everything you ate, you know. We had cows, hogs. Of course, back when I was in high school I plowed with all mules and these—but now we got tractors. But I plowed a mule from daylight to dark a lot of days back in—in the [19]50s.

00:03:08

AES: Do you have brothers and sisters?

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BB: Everybody is dead but me in the family.

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AES: Oh.

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BB: I had one sister and, of course, Daddy died first and then my sister and then Mama. That left me. We just had two in the family, two kids.

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AES: Did y'all grow up and go to school or did you just work on the farm and then get married?

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BB: We caught a school bus. We had to walk about a quarter mile to catch the school bus. Went to Winona High, graduated in [19]56.

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AES: And you went straight into the auto parts business?

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BB: Right. Came to Leland and worked for Scott Automotive for I don't know how many years. And then I worked for Goyer Supply, and then I owned my own business, and then I worked for Chad Oxnard, the Chrysler Plymouth dealer. Just time has flown.

00:04:09

AES: So tell me about kind of the evolution of the farm here and when y'all stopped growing cotton and corn and if it went fallow for a while and when you started back up.

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BB: Well I guess it was back in the—the time I finished school, they quit—quit farming just about. That was back in '56, I guess. Then we leased the land out to some other—some other people farmed it. We used to raise sweet potatoes; that was our main—raise them in the summertime and then have a winter crop, you know, to sell. But it got on a small amount; it got so expensive it wasn't feasible to operate, so then we went to what they call—we were growing vegetables. And I've been doing that, I don't know, since we moved back up here. And I think it was '02. I do it more or less—I like to see stuff grow and I just—you know, farming, more or

less, for a hobby because everything done got so expensive, ain't no such thing as making money on it anymore. But I like to watch stuff grow.

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AES: Well this is an awful lot of work for a hobby.

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BB: Yeah, well keeps you occupied.

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AES: So when y'all were over in Leland and Greenville, did y'all keep a home garden over there?

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BB: No. No, didn't have no—. I came home every weekend. I sort of had stuff growing up here, more or less to eat, you know, to—we put it in the freezer every summer for winter, you know. It's about near been a touch of farming always since I was born and able to get out and work.

00:05:59

AES: And so when you came back and—and started this hobby farm here back at your home place, did you—and you say you like to see things grow, but did you know that there would be a market for what you were growing?

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BB: Well yeah, because people got to eat. It's becoming more a more market than it was back then. Of course your price situation now is—is so high that back then you got seven or eight dollars for a bushel of peas, you know. That was—now then they're up to seventeen dollars and up for a bushel, so that's how high it's changed in so few a time, you know. So but it's a big market for produce now.

00:06:49

AES: Tell me about that because part of why I'm here is because you sell to the [Downtown] Greenwood Farmers Market and wholesale to restaurants in Greenwood. Tell me about how that connection started.

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BB: Well I used to pull to Greenville for—and then when the gasoline and diesel, the prices got so high and then they opened a farmers' market up in Greenwood, so I went over and was—and started pulling there instead of going to Greenville. Then it's a couple of cafes over there, what you got left that they buy. They'll take—buy what you got, your surplus that you got left, they'll buy it, so you got just about a clean sweep of selling everything that you carry. So I pulled—now near every town now has got a farmers' market, which I think most of them are successful. I know they started one up at Grenada this year. They called and wanted me to come up there, but I've been sort of obligated to Greenville—to Greenwood, so I've been pulling over there on Saturday.

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AES: And tell me what you think about selling at a farmers' market, what it's like.

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BB: Well, if you got the merchandise, you got—of course that's what a farmers' market—you got to have the produce. If you ain't got the produce, you can't do any good. But if you got the produce, they going to buy.

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AES: Can you tell me about some of your customers?

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BB: Well I got a lot of repeat customers on a lot of different items, you know. They—I see them week after week, you know. Of course they buy, like I say, they repeat their selves every week. The regular customers come back, quite a few of them.

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AES: And just—do just you go down there or you have some help or your wife travels with you?

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BB: I have one. I got one fellow that goes with me out there. He helps me pretty well every day on the fields. He's an elder guy. He just—me and him just sit under the shade tree a lot and shoot the bull. [*Laughs*]

00:09:01

AES: Speaking of shooting the bull, I imagine that it's kind of a different dynamic to have—you know, be a farmer and then have customers and talk to people at a market. Can you tell me what that's like?

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BB: Right. Well you take here, all during the week, I have customers come here and pick up produce, you know, as well as having the customers at the farmers' market. And I guess, right at the present time, your biggest demand are for homegrown tomatoes, which of course we've got fall tomatoes coming on, but all your spring tomatoes, they gone and nobody hardly got any tomatoes at the present time at all. That's one of your big topics that you don't have—that they want, you know. Of course they still ask for—I mean individual people don't know too much about farming, and they still ask for corn, you know. But corn, you know, goes out in the spring of the year. You don't have it in the summer and fall. It just is a lot of items they ask for, which, you know, you plant early and they come and it's gone; it's out for the year. You can't re—replant it, so—.

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AES: Do you think people are getting smarter about that maybe because of farmers' markets? They're learning a little bit?

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BB: I think so. I think they—they—a lot of people, you know, like I say, they don't realize what goes into raising produce. I mean it's a lot of—it's a lot of—you got to work at it if you have it and be successful, which I guess I'm halfway successful. I—I try to keep produce, you know,

going all year long. But like I say, it—it's a—it's work, activity, but you don't have to break your neck, you know, to keep up.

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AES: And people in—in Greenwood have told me that you're consistent and reliable in your produce. What do you attribute to that?

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BB: Well I don't—when I started pulling to Greenwood—but I've missed one day out of—since they've been open. And I had to go out of town that weekend, so I missed that Saturday, but I've been there ever since and try to have, you know, a good line of produce. And so far it's been pretty successful, you know.

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AES: So how do you maintain quality on your farm?

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BB: Well, you plant it and watch it, and the rest of it it's in the Good Lord's hand, as far as making it. Because all you do is plant it and work it. And now, of course, you—well it's got a lot to do with produce. You take—we had a rainy July which is uncommon; that hurt us this year on a lot of stuff. Then August come in—well July was hot and rainy, you know, and August came in and it's been fairly wet and a lot cooler than July. So usually August is your hottest month, but it's the direct opposite. July was the hottest month so far this year.

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AES: So tell me about—you took me on a tour of the farm earlier on your four-wheeler here. That was a lot of fun. Can you tell me for the record here about some of what you have planted out there?

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BB: Well at the present time I got hot peppers, eggplants, cucumbers, okra. My tomatoes are planted, but I mean they're not producing right at the present time, putting on a crop. I got [purple hull] peas and butterbeans in the field, which we're picking today. And, let's see. I got the old reliable Rattlesnake string beans. Rattlesnake is just a name. You tell people it's rattlesnake, they start looking for a snake, you know, but it's—it's the name of a bean and it's the best bean on the market, I guess, because everybody wants a rattlesnake bean. I guess that's about it as far as what I've got going on now. Watermelons and cantaloupes, I got them.

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AES: I understand you're well known for your melons.

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BB: Well, we start around the first of July of—or the last week of June and—and between—constantly, so far, we've had melons every week, and I love to sell a big watermelon. And of course you—when you're raising a crop, you got a lot of little ones, a lot of medium size, and a lot of big ones, you know. But so far I've had big size anywhere from 40- to 45-pound melons, which I like to sell. They sell a lot better than a smaller melon. But of course when you get into your smaller ones, of course they're keeping up, but we'll have—I got an acre that will be ripe

starting in about two weeks from now and finished up my old patch. So we just try—try to keep plants rotating all summer.

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AES: And now tell me about—are you a pick-your-own farm or you just let some people come and pick their own? How does that work?

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BB: Works both ways. Pay—pay them to pick; they pick their own on half, so either they can pick their own, and I charge them so much. And it's different ways to go. Some people want to pick their own, and, of course, we let them. And we'll pick, and then we'll sell. And some people say they want to get a bucket full of peas, and you let them get a bucket full of peas on—you know, to pick their self. That's about it.

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AES: And so do you have an idea if the people—are the people who come and pick their own, they're picking for home consumption or are they going to resell them?

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BB: No, they pick for their own consumption.

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AES: Like this Mr. Sanders, who I think just pulled back up. I understand he came and picked—just picked a five-gallon bucket this morning?

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BB: He's been here two or three days and picked a five-gallon bucket each day. And he's back this morning.

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AES: Tell me about Roger who was here earlier, the boiled peanut man. Is he a regular?

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BB: Well no, Roger is—he lives pretty fairly close to here, and he more or less peddles stuff. You see, he goes out and sits on the side of the road so for—boiled peanuts, watermelons and so forth. So he decided he'd get some peas to sell, so he come and picked some peas, and then he bought some peas to resell. That's the first time he's been here this year.

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AES: So tell me about planting and—and growing and maintaining and how you do that and who helps you.

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BB: Well, like I say, it's me and one more. We do our best. We start early in the morning and go—what is it—like it was in July. We'd knock off about ten o'clock and go back in the evening and work a few hours, but we do it all ourselves, just me and him. We got the equipment and the tractors, and we do the planting and the—yeah, the tilling and—and the picking. Well, of course, when it gets picking time, you have to have help to pick, so they come out and pick different

ways. Like I say, they pick by the buckets. They pick their own. You pay them to pick—different ways, you know. The main thing is, if you raise it, get it out, and because so many people don't have anything to eat. Like take a bushel of peas and eat for several weeks.

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AES: So tell me again about the pricing of all that, if they come pick their own what they get.

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BB: Well, if they pick their own, well you'll charge them five dollars a bucket [five gallons]. And then if you're paying the people, you pay them eight dollars a bushel [eight gallons]. And then some people come and pick you a bucket and their selves a bucket, which they call that's picking on halves. Some of them do that—especially you get into butterbeans. Butterbeans, you can—you mention butterbeans and people run because they—that's a hard thing to pick and a long time to fill up a bushel. But mostly that's done by picking on halves.

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AES: And do you have them—the most pickers for beans or does that change throughout the year during—depending on what you're growing?

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BB: Well I just plant a few butterbeans. I don't plant that many. Like I say, you can't hardly get anybody to pick them because it's so hard and takes so long. So I don't plant too many butterbeans, which it's a big demand for butterbeans because nobody else fools with butterbeans. Some people—I know one place between here and Eupora, they plant butterbeans and they got a

butterbean picker. Of course with—they have butterbeans about two weeks out of the year, and then they're gone because they use that machine and it cuts the vines and all down. They can't go by it and re-pick. But most—nobody hardly raises butterbeans on account they're so—getting people to pick them and it takes so long to—to pick a bushel.

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AES: But then when you have them, I imagine you can charge a premium for them.

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BB: Well, not that—I mean you—it costs you, like I say, pretty good to get them picked. Of course that's what runs the price of butterbeans up is your length of time to pick. And it—it's just a costly item to get harvested.

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AES: So those—that group of folks who's in the field right now picking, have they been picking for you for a while?

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BB: Yeah, this is about the third or fourth year they picked. They do a good job and always want to pick. Now they—I'm paying them, of course, to pick. Sometimes when I got extra peas in the early spring, they'll pick on halves and to get them some for their cooler, and when they get what they want on halves, I pay them so much to—to pick for me, then, by the bushel, you know.

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AES: And do they come and pick other things for you during the year?

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BB: No, just peas and butterbeans. That's the only thing I get—you know, we do the rest.

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AES: So do you know what they do the rest of the year?

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BB: Oh, I have no idea.

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AES: Huh. Okay.

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BB: Well, I think they done left the field now.

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AES: They're still out there.

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BB: Anyway, they'll—I know one of them sits with an old lady. She'll be cut—she just picks early in the morning. They want to get started—we started at six o'clock this morning. Of course you can't hardly see at six o'clock. I told them we had to get some flashlights for them to see, but

they want to get started early. And when it's hot, of course, they want to quit by 9:00 or 10:00. But they can pick some peas in a short time.

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AES: So is there anything here that you're growing just for yourself?

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BB: Well I put—I fill up a couple, three freezers of butterbeans and peas and everything else other—you know that we got. Yet we still go to the grocery store and spend \$102 [*Laughs*] in a short time but we—we keep our freezer—we put up produce every year.

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AES: What's your favorite thing that you grow?

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BB: Well, that's sort of hard to say. I like to see anything grow and produce. Of course everything is on about a ninety-day cycle as far as planting to harvest time, you know. Pretty well everything is ninety days so, yeah. I keep a record on planting day, and then I know about when harvest time is going to come, especially on watermelons, you know. I told you that the watermelons will be ready in about two weeks with the patch you saw down there, which I got the book down yesterday, and about the sixth or seventh of next month will be the—the time to start getting them. So it's all, like I say, more or less a hobby.

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AES: Is there something that's harder than anything else to grow?

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BB: Well, like I say, all you can do is plant it and cultivate it and hope for the right type of climate and rain, and the Good Lord does the rest.

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AES: Do you save back seeds?

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BB: No, everything done got—that's a different thing. Way back when I was a kid we used to save seeds and replant them. Now everything got so much hybrid germination that you plant the seeds. Some of them come up and some won't, and then if they come up, they won't yield the product, so you have to start off with new seeds every year.

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AES: Where are you getting your seed?

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BB: We get them out at Hi Grade, the farm store out on 82.

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AES: Can you tell me how farming has changed since you were young? You were talking about the mules, but are there other ways?

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BB: Tractors. [*Laughs*] Mules and tractors. Everything now—of course a lot of your convenient tractors have got air-condition and all that kind of stuff, but we still operate with just open cabs. But we get the job done.

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AES: Well tell me about that old red Massey Ferguson you have down there in the field.

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BB: That was—I plowed that when I was a kid before I finished school—went from mule—that was our first tractor. So I plowed wit it. Like I say, we used to grow cotton and corn back then. That was our first tractor. And then we got a hold of an International, and then we got a hold of a big Ford, and I guess that's about it.

00:23:59

AES: Well that's—the International tractor we're sitting next to here, is that your fertilizing tractor?

00:24:04

BB: Well I use it more or less—it's old and I use it for light-type of work like pulling a section higher up or pulling a tiller—I mean a—a—I lost my word. I just do light work with it, but my main tractor as far as heavy-duty stuff is my Ford diesel.

00:24:33

AES: This blue one right here?

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BB: The blue one, uh-huh. And finally I got up—this year I got me a four-wheeler and that takes a lot of steps off of you.

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AES: You just got it this year?

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BB: Just—that's my first time to own one. I got it—I got it this year.

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AES: I bet you're enjoying it. [*Laughs*]

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BB: Yeah, I do. You see where I done tore the roads up with it. [*Laughs*] Yeah, it takes a lot of—the only thing about it, you've got a tractor in one place and then your four wheeler in another, and you still got to do some walking sometimes to get to one place to the other because you're always needing one, and it's way down the end of the side of the field or you got—you need the other one, so you had to walk one way or the other sometimes anyway. But it takes—it takes a load off of you, as far as walking.

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AES: So tell me where—Winona is in Montgomery County, is that right?

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BB: Right. Winona, Montgomery County.

00:25:26

AES: All right. And so we're east of Interstate 55. Can you tell me what Winona has been kind of known for in the past and how farming here might differ from farming in the Delta, just over west a little bit?

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BB: Well, of course it's—on your scales of farming, a lot more bigger farmers in the Delta than it is in the hills. A lot of hills, you know, are private-owned farms, you know, but now it's done got where people that own land don't farm. They rent the land out. It's a lot of that up here of people renting. They raise mostly—mostly—well, they try corn, but if you don't get the right season in the hills, of course, you can't irrigate, and it's a hit and miss situation on corn. So they grow more or less cotton and soybeans.

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AES: So you don't have any of these fields irrigated at all?

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BB: No, uh-uh.

00:26:29

AES: Do you water them at all with the—with this—?

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BB: No, if I was young, I'd either put me a well down or either dam up one of these hollows and have a big pond and pump out of it. I could easily irrigate everything I got, but I'm too old to think about that.

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AES: So it seems like you've been having really good luck here, then, with what you can get off of this land.

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BB: Yeah, it's successful, but, like I say, it's got its ups and downs like every—just like life. Life goes up and down.

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AES: What's the hardest thing about farming?

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BB: Well, I can't say any of it it's real hard. Of course it gets tiresome at times. And you get burnt out, especially when you got 95-degree weather or temperature and then it's the humidity. I mean it'll wear you out now, I'm telling you. But you just have to stick with it and do what you can.

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AES: Do you remember from growing up how the weather has changed if at all and how that's affected farming?

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BB: Well I don't think the weather has really changed but what makes you—you know, back when I was a kid and coming up, we had to take a Sears & Roebuck Catalog or something to fan at night to go to sleep, you know, because no air-conditioning. And I think that's what making people feel so bad now—it feels so hot is on count of air-conditioning. That's my belief. Now I don't know; a lot of people say the sun is hotter and all that kind of stuff, but I don't believe it. I believe it's still about the same, but air-conditioning has made the change more or less.

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AES: Do you have air-conditioning in your house here?

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BB: Right, right. Air-conditioning is—like I say, it's been around a lot of people [*Laughs*]. Yes.

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AES: So how does it feel being back on this home place and working the land that your parents did?

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BB: I like—like I say I’ve worked forty-some years and stayed inside, so I like the outside. And I like to stay active.

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AES: Do you harvest pecans from these pecan trees you have?

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BB: Got two, four, I got six pecan trees. They so far have—have had a good crop that comes every year on them. Of course when they fall, we pick them up. We shell them, and then if I don’t get rid of them and sell them, then I’ll freeze them, you know, because they’re still fresh pecans.

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AES: Did your parents plant those trees?

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BB: Yeah, they were planted when I was a kid, but I can’t remember what—when we did plant them. I don’t remember what year it was.

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AES: And when your parents were doing cotton and corn and all, I imagine they toted it up to Greenwood. Can you tell me about that?

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BB: Yeah, well you had gins here that did the cotton, of course, and then the cotton went to two—the compressors in Greenwood. I know I used to carry it to town. Some—of course, that was back in the mule and wagon time; I'd get the—or they'd buy the—they'd buy the seed and that's what I'd get out of. I'd get the money for the seed, which that was a lot of money back then, you know, say \$35 or \$40 for a ton of seed. But now then it's way on up there, higher than that.

00:30:12

AES: Is there still a lot of cotton grown here in Montgomery County?

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BB: A lot of cotton grow(ed) in Montgomery County.

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AES: Did farmers in this area change to corn for a time and then go back to cotton or—?

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BB: They tried corn but they, like I say, they depend on—they depend on the weather. If you don't get rain at certain times of the year on corn, you just don't make the crop. This year has been bad on it, so most of them have gone back to cotton. And in the Delta, of course, you irrigate all that, and they still plant a lot of corn.

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AES: Now and we talked about the Farmers' Market, but where else do you sell in Greenwood, your produce?

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BB: Well I got more or less, she buys—the Delta Bistro buys the majority of what I have left of certain items. She [Taylor Bowen Ricketts] buys it all, like tomatoes and Irish potatoes; that's her—her two biggest products that she buys from me. And she usually—what I got left, she buys because they use a lot of it over in the café, tomatoes and Irish potatoes. In fact, I'll just about sell out of Irish potatoes. That's one of your earliest crops that you grow. I'm just about to run out of Irish potatoes for this year.

00:31:45

AES: So tell me how you got hooked up with Taylor Bowen Ricketts at Delta Bistro. How did she know to buy from you?

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BB: Well she was one of the customers that came by at the Farmers' Market, and I guess she saw there was an opportunity to buy fresh stuff, you know, so she said come by and what she could use she would buy, which she's been faithful doing every week so far.

00:32:08

AES: Are there other cafés that you sell wholesale to?

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BB: No, not in Greenwood.

00:32:12

AES: In other towns?

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BB: No, not unless it's just individual people, you know, to come out and pick up stuff.

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AES: So are those your three main outlets then, Delta Bistro, the [Downtown] Greenwood Farmers' Market and then—?

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BB: The Farmers' Market is my, you know, the biggest outlet and then I—like I say, and she's nice enough to buy what's left of the product that she uses, which she does.

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AES: So what about off-season, when the Farmers' Market is closed? Where does all your produce go?

00:32:46

BB: Well, you're just about out. See, they run—I forgot what the—the date that they—when they close but it's over in the fall of the year, and it's really hard to have produce from the time

they start until they close because stuff just plays out, and you just can't have it year-round, which it's coming to that point now. But that produce is getting scarce every week.

00:33:18

AES: Have you ever eaten at Delta Bistro?

00:33:20

BB: Yeah, I've ate there several times. And it's mighty good.

00:33:26

AES: Have you gotten to see what she does with your tomatoes?

00:33:27

BB: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

00:33:31

AES: Are you and your wife big cooks?

00:33:34

BB: Yeah, we—we keep—neither one of us are really a meat-eater. We're more or less vegetable eaters. I've raised—like I say, we put up stuff and eat all winter and we eat all summer, so—. I still have to go to the grocery store, though.

00:33:52

AES: So y'all do some canning?

00:33:53

BB: Not much canning; everything goes to freezer.

00:33:58

AES: I think this is Mr. Sanders coming to see you up here? All right. We can pause this—. All right, so he was coming to ask after a few tomatoes from you. Gold at this point, I imagine. But so, yeah, it's about to rain here and you got to get back down to your pea patch, so Mr. Blaylock, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to end on or make sure to mention?

00:34:20

BB: I believe we pretty well done covered everything.

00:34:23

AES: All right. How much longer do you think you'll be doing this?

00:34:25

BB: Well, I'm a good old happy 74, and soon-to-be 75, and soon as I got—the Good Lord to give me the health like I got, I'll always do it if I'm able because I just love it. [*Emphasis*

Added]

00:34:38

AES: Well thank you for sitting here with me today. I really appreciate it.

00:34:39

BB: Okay. I appreciate it.

00:34:41

[End Bennie Blaylock Interview]