

JOHN D. ASHCRAFT, III
Roebuck Plantation Blueberry Farm - Sidon, MS

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Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
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Project: Downtown Greenwood Farmers' Market

[Begin John Ashcraft-1 Interview]

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Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter on Friday, August 19, 2011. I'm with John Ashcraft in Sidon, Mississippi, sitting on a bench, staring at a field of blueberry bushes. Mr. Ashcraft, if I could get you to state your name and your occupation for the record, please, sir?

00:00:19

John Ashcraft: John D. Ashcraft, III and currently, I grow blueberries here in the Mississippi Delta.

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AES: May I ask you to state your birth date for the record?

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JA: April 19, 1952.

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AES: All right. And let's start just by talking about your family tree in the Mississippi Delta and getting a little bit of that history, if we could.

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JA: Well our family moved from Florence, Alabama, to Grenada, Mississippi, and lived there for a while, and then in 1935 my family bought this place and moved here, Roebuck Plantation

in the Mississippi Delta, and it's been a cotton, soybean, sugarcane, corn type of agricultural business. And then in 1988 we planted these blueberries and—and have been mostly interested in those, renting out the [rest of the] land to—to our relatives, close relatives that live real, real close to us.

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AES: Okay, so the—you still have all the acreage in the—the original family farm but other family members farm it with everything else?

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JA: Yes, that's correct. The only agricultural interest we have right now is the blueberries and family-wise we—that's what we're limited to now.

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AES: So what happened in 1988 to make y'all want to get into the blueberry business?

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JA: My father [John D. Ashcraft, Jr.], who is—who has been a real mover and shaker in our family, decided that we should get into the blueberry industry because it was a real interesting fruit and—and we should be able to grow these in the—in the rich Mississippi Delta. And I lived down on the Gulf Coast at that particular time and worked for a chemical company. And he called me up, and then we talked to my brother [John Edwin Gilliam Ashcraft] about starting this project. And when we were growing up, we used—we're Presbyterian. When we were growing

up, we used to go to Montreat, North Carolina, and spend every summer in Montreat, North Carolina.

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Well we hiked all of the mountains there in North Carolina, and one of the fascinating things in North Carolina was the wild blueberries that were up on top of the hill. You really had to make an effort to get there, but, man, they were good.

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And so when he brought that memory back up to us, we were—we were interested in—in growing blueberries, cultivated blueberries. These are—these are Rabbiteye Blueberries, which are cultivated and—and were researched out of North Carolina, the University of North Carolina. And Rabbiteye Blueberries grow real well here in the South—in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, whereas in the northern parts of the United States, it's another variety called the High Bush. And it's best adapted to that particular environment, heat environment, cold environment and winter cycle and that—that type of thing.

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AES: Do you know why this blueberry is called the Rabbiteye Blueberry?

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JA: Because on the end of it when it grows it—it's got a little round circle on the end of it that looks just like a little rabbit's eye, if you were to hold it next to a rabbit's eye. So that—.

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AES: Have you done that?

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JA: No, I haven't. [*Laughs*] No, I haven't.

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AES: The curiosity would kill me. I would have to try and do that—find me a rabbit. So tell me a little bit about, you know, we were talking by the cars before we started recording about blueberries being such a big crop in Mississippi, and you were talking about you being the—the northern-most [grower] in the state. Can you talk a little bit about the industry and how you're involved in the industry in Mississippi?

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JA: Sure. I—we're really the only ones here in the Mississippi Delta that I'm aware of. There—there have been a couple others that made a couple attempts, but we're the only ones here in the Mississippi Delta that I know of. There's another farmer in Holly Springs, Mississippi, real close to Memphis, Tennessee, who is really successful. And, but when you get into the bulk of the acreage, it's going to be Jackson, Mississippi, and really Hattiesburg and south of Hattiesburg before you get into the real big volume of acreage and—and bushes down there.

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We—we got into the Mississippi-Louisiana [Miss-Lou] Blueberry Growers Association back in 1988 when it was just—just forming up then and it's been a real growing association. We take in new members on a right regular basis as—as acreage comes online. I'm not certain of the number of pounds we've produced in 1988, the—the Association as a group, probably close to a quarter of a million pounds, and then this past year we had contracts for over 2,000,000 pounds.

So it's—it's grown ten-fold in—in this time period. And there are always new farmers that are interested in trying small plots of—of blueberries and—and make an attempt at farming them.

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AES: How many acres did you first plant in '88?

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JA: Well in '88 we put in 3,000 plants, and we've since expanded that to a little over 7,000 plants, which we—we number in plants, but that's about eleven acres. And we put them all in by hand. We drilled holes and put in composts around each plant and put in underground watering systems and put a—planted them all by hand and—and that's pretty much the way you take care of blueberries is all by hand there. There are a few farm implements you can use, but there's really not any functional way of doing it other than by hand because the roots grow so close to the surface of the ground that any kind of tillage tools or heavy equipment like that would tear up the—tear up the plants and hurt them, so it's—it's all pretty much hand work.

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AES: Was there anything that, you know, that your—your father and your family in the years of farming cotton and soybeans and everything else that—that helped when you started the blueberry crop, like things that knowledge from—from that way of farming that helped you when you went into blueberry farming?

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JA: Well agriculture is agriculture, and one of the big advantages was we already had the land. We didn't have to go through that expense of purchasing the land. We already had it. So we just had to select which [part] we could take out of the normal agricultural industry that we were in and—and devote to an orchard of blueberries. So I think just the family history of having agriculture in our background and knowing other people we could talk to, both regular cotton and soybean farmers and helping advice from them has—was definitely the advantage.

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The drawback to it was that most of the farmers in the area depend upon the local County Agent, either Grenada County or Leflore County Agent, to advise them on—on their agricultural practices, both how to treat the plants and—and what to do with them. But our county agents are all focused on cotton and soybeans and—and that type of thing. They don't have the expertise in the vegetables and the fruits that—that we were interested in. And—and so it's been a—it's been a—an effort trying to learn about them, both on our own and—and research. In 1988, of course the—the—the Internet was not as accessible as it is now and, of course, you can—you can Google up anything you'd like on the Internet now and do extensive research and reading. But here in the State of Mississippi we also have down in Poplarville, Mississippi, a blueberry experiment station, as well. So that was—that was nice. They were—they had started about—about five years before we got into the Mississippi-Louisiana Blueberry Growers Association, so we were able to tour—tour their facility and get some of their groundwork and—and cost analysis on—on growing blueberries and potential profit margins on growing blueberries and what it was going to take. So that was—that was helpful.

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But they were—they're—they're a pure research facility, so what they tried to translate the numbers into a commercial facility like ours here really didn't translate very well. But as far

as growing the plants, they've been helpful. You can call down there and ask some of their doctors, "What's this weird bug?" **[Laughs]** And they're able to let you know, you know.

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AES: So are these—is this area right here that we're looking at with the blueberry bushes, are those some of the original bushes that y'all planted?

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JA: Yeah, these—these bushes here are twenty-three years old. And occasionally we'll have to—have to replace the bush. We'll lose—just through natural causes we'll lose anywhere from twenty to fifty bushes a year—some years more and some years less. Most years less, as a matter of fact. They're real hardy plants. And they're very forgiving. One stem will die from unknown causes, and the entire rest of the bush is fine and healthy so they—they—it's—it's a real resilient bush. It's—it's nice to work with and vigorous growing.

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AES: Does the age of the plant change the fruit at all?

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JA: No, the age of the plant does not change the fruit. Although we like to cut out some of the older canes or stalks—canes is what we call them, but it's not really a cane as you would think in blackberries and—and other types of fruits. And it's a stalk. We—we like to cut out some of the older stalks. They're not as vigorous, and they won't produce quite as many blueberries as the younger stalks will. And once they—once the berries—plants really start rolling and really start

growing, they'll grow a lot of stalks that will choke out the middle of the plant. And you can't get the air blowing through the plant and the breezes going. So we'll—we'll extract some of the older canes every year. We're currently pruning right now. Well, we're just finishing up pruning up right now for the growing season next year in the production for next year.

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And we've recently trimmed our bushes back from eight or nine feet down to six and seven feet. And we have one section—we have thirteen sections under water, under irrigation, and we've got one section that we currently cut back to five feet, and as an experiment we've taken it out of production and cut it back to five feet to—to test some—some different pruning techniques that we'd like to see if they would work better or differently or produce more—produce more fruit or just produce more stalks. We're really after the fruit.

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AES: So if you prune a bush and get out—cut out the old stalks, will a blueberry bush produce fruit indefinitely, if you manage it like that?

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JA: Well, we're twenty-three years and counting. It looks to me as if—if they will. As long as they live. Like I said, occasionally we have one just up and—up and die for some unknown reason, and we'll just put another bush back in its place. But most of these are twenty-three years old. Those down there in the—in the lower field are between twenty and twenty-one years old each and—and still going strong. So as far as we know, it's a—it's a continuous cultivar, just keeps growing and keeps producing. It doesn't seem to wear out.

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AES: Does—do the little cold snaps in the Delta have any effect on the bushes, or do you treat them differently in the winter?

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JA: Blueberries actually love cold weather. And, as a matter of fact, in order to produce fruit they have to have 400 hours—chill hours every winter. And it doesn't matter whether it's at zero degrees or minus-ten degrees or twenty-eight degrees. It just has to be the hours below thirty-two degrees. And once they establish that number of hours, then they start looking for sunshine and warmer weather to start producing their blooms and their—and their—and their fruit.

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The tricky part here in the upper regions of the Delta are that we could have a late freeze and—and April 15th, April 10th, April 1st. Here in this field we've actually had four inches of snow on April 1st here in the—. But as long as the buds are—have not become un-dormant and started swelling, that really won't create a problem. But if we have a—an early thaw, an early spring, nice and warm, everything is cuddly, wants to grow, the—the buds will start swelling and the blooms will start coming out, and it could be middle to late March and they'll be in full bloom, and then we'll have a cold snap of under thirty-two degrees. And anybody that's watched the news in the past several years have seen the—the strawberry fields in—in Florida suffer greatly when—when the temperature drops below thirty-two degrees.

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The same thing could happen to us here. It's happened to us twice, but that's twice in twenty-three years, so—. We're not too concerned with it, but it's always something we look carefully—the weather forecast and what's coming up, not that we're—not that we're set up to

do anything about it. There's—there's—you could—you could buy that type of equipment that could spray water on as—as you've seen the strawberry fields do. They spray water on it, and the water freezes over the berries. But with only two instances in twenty-three years, we—we really can't navigate the financial boundaries of putting in that expensive equipment for two failures in twenty-three years for that particular problem.

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AES: Uh-hmm.

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JA: So they're real healthy bushes. You know they—they persevere through a lot of—a lot of stuff. I—what surprises me the most is this horrible, horrible heat we have in the middle of the summertime here in the Mississippi Delta, and they seem to shrug it off because their natural environment is in a pine forest somewhere, up on a hillside at 3,000 feet. And you wouldn't think that these types of plants would survive in 105-degree weather with 115-degree heat index. But they do fairly well. We try to keep at least a one-inch rainfall on these plants every week, whether it be natural or through irrigation. And that certainly helps. That keeps the ground nice and cool around the roots, and the leaves seem to be resilient enough that they withstand that kind of heat.

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AES: How do you irrigate when you do that?

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JA: Underground water system. Every plant has an individual water feeder that comes to it, and we divided up—we've divided our fields up into sections so that we can turn individual sections on as they need or—they need more water or—. We also use our underground watering system for fertilization purposes. We can put the exact amount of—of fertilizer on each plant that—that they need and—versus flying a plane over the field loaded down with fertilizer. There's twelve feet of space in between each row where all that fertilizer will fall to no use if we flew it on with an aircraft. So we went to the expense of putting in an underground watering system, and that way we can individually water the sections and fertilize them.

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AES: Did you install that in the very beginning, or is that something you worked up to?

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JA: Yes. Yes, that was some of our original research that we had decided that—that was the way we wanted to go. There are other options for—for watering these systems but we had—on the—on the place we already had a substantial well down to 1,100 feet, and the water comes out of Nashville, Tennessee, through all the aquifers. And it was really, really good, fine water. And since we already had the well onsite on location, we decided not to go with some of the other systems that could—overhead water, trailed collapsible hoses around the field, things like that. So we just went ahead and went with the expense of putting in an underground system to start with. We—you can add it later on if you like, underground watering system. You can even take it up and—and readapt it if—if you'd like. It's a little bit of a problem. It's best to put it in initially.

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AES: How did you decide what acreage to use for blueberries? Was that a hard decision at all?

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JA: No, it was what was there. We—we—this—it's right alongside of the riverbank. And back until the government decided that we would no longer be in an agricultural environment where the river would flood each winter, overrun the land, and then the farmer would have to depend upon the water receding and going back into the river. During that time period back when we first arrived here the—the river would provide a lot of wonderful topsoil. And right up against the riverbank is where it would provide the most sandy type of topsoil. So we planted these along a strip, along the riverbank that really wasn't all that ideal for tractor maneuverability. These are two little pockets and holes in tractor maneuverability but were great for the soil type.

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So we took that out of—out of the normal agriculture and put it into this orchard. We got good soil type and—and the tractors didn't have to worry about turning around in odd spots anymore.

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AES: And you just said, "Normal agriculture." I wonder if anybody here in the Delta thought y'all were kind off your rocker for wanting to plan blueberries in the Delta.

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JA: Oh, I—I'd count on it. I'd say my father probably was really counting on it. He—he liked to do things that were not typically conventional. He—he preferred to do other things and this fit

right in with his particular persona. He was a real interesting character, a wonderful guy and— but he could really pull some rabbits out of a hat, so—. This—this fit right with—right with what he was looking to do, something different.

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AES: What was your father's name?

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JA: John D. Ashcraft, Jr., the same as mine.

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AES: Okay. And he just passed fairly recently [in 2009], and I've—everybody who—when I've said I'm coming to see you or wanted to come see you, everybody mentions your father. Could you tell us a little bit more about who he was and—and how he endeared himself to so many people?

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JA: He wasn't a politician, but he easily could have been. He made himself a friend to anybody that—that walked up to him. He had extensive knowledge about almost anything. He was a real learned gentleman, read extensively on no particular topic, and so he could carry on a long conversation in detail with—with virtually anybody he spoke to but he was such a friendly human being that—that was easy for him to make friends.

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He was a—his—his mother and father were born and raised in Florence, Alabama, and that's where Dad was born was Florence, Alabama. And they moved to Troy Plantation in Grenada in the early [19]20s, and he grew up briefly there. I think he was eight or nine when the family decided that they would leave the hills and—and come to the Delta and buy a little more expansive piece of property and continue on with agriculture.

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So he—he had—he had a diverse life. He was born in 1928, which was right there at the start of the Depression. As a young, young person he got to see some of the bad things that could go on under financial stress. And so he was very frugal with the penny and very business savvy and very business oriented, just—just from that experience.

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And he graduated from Mississippi State. I think. It was always some discussion in the family whether he actually graduated or not. We're not—we're not really sure. Although he went on to another six years at Delta State University when he was in his—in his sixties because he just got bored, and he wanted to go back to school. But the Korean War came up and he was—he was in the Army Reserves and they called him, and he had to leave Mississippi State. So I don't think he actually graduated from Mississippi State. I've never seen a diploma, but he went to the Korean War and he married my mother, just as so many gentlemen did that were about to leave for war, and they got married quickly to make sure—. Although he had been dating my mother for quite a while, he just wanted to make sure that he was married to her before he had to go. And I was born while he was—during—in the conflict. And then he came back home, and we've lived here the rest of our lives. Moved into—moved from the home place in 1964 into town [Greenwood], as so many people did over time. The town has its own lure. **[Laughs]**

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But one of the things was we have—had five children. My mom and dad had five children. And it was a real labor getting five children back and forth to school and grocery shopping and, you know, piano lessons and all the stuff that everybody in town does on a normal basis, but it was thirty minutes either way for us to do it and times five, so—. They just—they just decided to move into town, so it would be easier on them.

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AES: And what kind of memories do you have of you and your siblings and farming life, if any. I mean living in town, but do you come down here and work or, you know, have—have a lot of responsibility down here in the—in the farm?

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JA: During growing up? Oh, I didn't—I didn't move into town until I was fourteen. I think—I think the thing that struck me the most from when I was growing up, it never seemed that my—my father was paying any attention to what I was doing. And my cousin, who lives right down the road from me, he and I were virtually the same age, and we would horseback ride and—and round up cattle. We had quite a few cattle on the place at that time—round up cattle together and—and do all the normal country stuff, but we would be all over the place, out in the woods, doing whatever we wanted to. It appeared that way, up here on the Indian Mountain camping out for a week and, you know, anything an eight-, nine-, ten-, eleven-year-old kid, boy—boy-child would want to do. And it seemed that Dad was never paying much attention to us.

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It wasn't until later that I learned there wasn't anything that Daddy didn't know what we were doing because we had so many employees on the place, at the time, that there were

virtually thirty sets of eyes on us at all times. And every one of them would rat on us. **[Laughs]**
So Daddy didn't have to be real concerned with what we were doing because everybody was watching us already.

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That—that was—that was something funny, because when we were raising our children, we didn't have thirty sets of eyes watching our children. We were raising our children in town and, you know, we had to depend on our friends and—and relatives in town to catch them riding down Park Avenue or being at the wrong place at the wrong time, whereas down here on the place, when I was growing up, we could be anywhere we wanted to at any time. But we were being watched all the time. And I think just the reverse is true about city life and raising children, you know, in town. That's—but it was—it was nice.

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Oh, we had chores down here all of us. There were five children and, you know, I was mowing the grass or, you know, taking care of whatever needed to be taken care of. The two boys usually had the—the more physical jobs, but my sisters worked in the gardens and—and flower beds and my mother—my mother just loves flowers and—and plants and, you know, she tried to teach them as much as she could about her particular passions. But that was—that was life growing up down here.

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AES: Do your children have an appreciation for this place in that way or something similar to it?

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JA: I think something similar to it because we've imparted the history of it to them. And so they're well aware of it and they are—they—my son has worked down here with—he's in fact, the summer when my daddy passed away, my son was really instrumental in making sure that I was able to handle this situation down here and make sure everything went right. So he's been instrumental in helping me, and he knows the family history and—and so he's—he's prideful of it and takes it into consideration when he makes decisions that he's—he wants to make.

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My daughter is twenty-eight, and he's twenty-five and—and so they—you know, they try not to do foolish things. *[Laughs]*

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AES: So, but they're in the business? They're still connected to the plantation?

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JA: No, they're not. My—my daughter is a banker and my son—my son works for an ambulance company. He's in—he's interested in the medical field. What portion, I don't know yet because twenty-five-year-olds don't talk to their sixty-year-old dads like *[Laughs]*—just like any other generation.

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AES: Do they still live in Greenwood or in the area?

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JA: No, my daughter lives in Columbus, Mississippi, and my—well, my son does live with us but it's only part time because he lives in Clarksdale when he's working for the ambulance company. So we see him more often than we see our daughter, but it's—it's not as often as you would think.

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AES: And what are their names if, I may ask?

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JA: Oh, my son's name is John D. Ashcraft, IV. We call him Chad. And my daughter's name is Janie Elizabeth Hardin Ashcraft. And Chad went to the University of Southern Mississippi, and Janie went to Northeastern University in Boston in Banking and Finance. And that's what she's doing now in Columbus, Mississippi.

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AES: Well back to blueberries, do you think that the Delta grows a different or better blueberry?

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JA: It's delicious. [*Laughs*] I don't—I don't know that we can compare the two. The—the flavor is very blueberry but it—it's very sweet. The loads we took to the—the packing plant this summer, they—they remarked on how sweet our berries were, and these are guys that have been growing berries as long as we—we have. I don't know if it was the particular season or anything in particular we might have done in the last two years. They were very sweet, just full of sugar. But I—I wouldn't rate ours any—any more than the ones in Hattiesburg and Poplarville and

down on the Gulf Coast. They're delicious. It's hard not to like a blueberry—little blue dynamos, you know.

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AES: Where is the packing plant that you use?

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JA: It's in Purvis, Mississippi. Mississippi-Louisiana Blueberry Growers Association is actually in Purvis, Mississippi, and there of the growers has a packing facility that we all use. And of course he charges us with packing but MSLOU has access to flash-freezing, the—the packaged berries that we have for the—the large commercial market, and this—this same processor processes growers who present berries for the fresh market that you see in Wal-Mart and Kroger's and all over the country in the little—little pint or pint-and-a-half containers that are in the fresh market.

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AES: Hmm. So tell me about when it's high season and what things are like around here and when it starts and kind of what it's like.

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JA: High season, yes. Well, we're in high gear [*Laughs*]*—it starts approximately June 1st, although this season actually started about a week earlier. And I was remarking to my wife last night, I might have actually missed the first of the season by a week—that it might have actually*

started the second week in May because we're just so set on generally preparing to go to the field around June 1st.

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But once we go to the field around June 1st, in this particular operation I have—I hire pickers to come in and pick by hand for the local market, the people here in Greenwood who would like to purchase blueberries. And at the same time we're doing that, we're running the machine in the field. And the—the berries come off in—in—we have four cultivars here—Climax, Premier, Tifblue, and Powderblue that come off about a week and a half to two weeks different on each cultivar starting in June. And then the berries don't come off at the same time on each one of the cultivars. So we have—normally have about a six- to eight-week period where we're going back and forth and back and forth over the field with the machines, while the hand pickers are picking in individual buckets.

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And so it's a normal six- to eight-week cycle that we're constantly in the field all day long, although this summer early in June it was so extremely hot that I just couldn't risk anybody being in the field under those conditions. So we changed our—our work habits. We—we tried to get out of the field by 2:30 or three o'clock and just collapse anywhere we could collapse and—and preferably back at the house in the air-conditioning. So last summer it wasn't quite that hot, and so I have my suspicions that Al Gore may be onto something. **[Laughs]** Both from the cycle, the—the berries being ready a little bit earlier, getting through faster. So we were finished with our berry picking by July 1st, which is a four-week window—very short, very short. And a lot of our old-time customers there in Greenwood mentioned to us that, “Gosh, you're through already?” And we went, “Well, what can you do?” You just deal with it as it comes.

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But it's very busy—picking. And we take orders both on our website—we keep everybody up to date on what's going on in the field. For the first time this year we had a website. We keep everybody up to date with what is going on in the field, what the weather conditions are, whether or not we're closed that day due to weather, but we take orders by the phone or on the website.

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The people who normally come here and pick their own, and we have quite a few long-time people who pick their own, they've been here many years in a row. They just show up whenever because some of the new people will say, "Well, are you open on the weekend?" Well we might be. "Well, are y'all open on Wednesday?" Well, we might be. It just depends upon what we're doing with the machinery and—and picking by hand for the local market.

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So we—they just show up at eight o'clock at night when it's nice and cool and start picking berries. And then we see them a couple of weeks later, and they say, "Oh, I got some berries from you. Here's some money for you." So it's real interesting. And my dad, this is back to my dad; he didn't figure anybody could come out here and pick blueberries in 105-degree weather who wasn't honest. And so we just have gone by the—the honor system here, as far as pick your own.

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AES: I like that. Do you have an idea, generally, of people who pick their own how many they pick?

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JA: They—they—it—it's quite a range. I would say it depends upon what time of the day and—who they are. If they come at the wrong time of the day, when it's really hot, they'll probably limit themselves to two gallons or so. But I've got a couple of individuals that will pick ten or twelve gallons at—at a time and they'll come back two or three times in a week. One lady in particular, she's a sweetheart. She's out here almost every day and what—whether she picks one gallon or three gallons that day, she eats them all that night. And she's back here the following day picking again. She—I just [*Laughs*]*—*I love blueberries to death, but this lady is a real—real particularly interesting—. But she brings her mother. She brings her friends. And then occasionally we have a group—family groups come out that we've known forever, such as the—the Warren clan. They'll bring the Warren(s) and the Montgomery(s) and there will be four generations of them, all the little—little kids in their little rubber boots, and it's just darling seeing them wandering around picking blueberries. It's—it's a nice experience. You get to meet a lot of people this way, which Daddy knew that. He—he—and he liked meeting people and talking to people, so, yeah, that fit right into his persona. That's what he wanted to do.

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AES: Well that seems like, you know, twenty-five years ago is kind of maybe like a neighborly thing to do if people wanted blueberries and they knew you had blueberries, but now there's like this desire for these you-pick farms for people to have the experience. Do you—has that changed since you've been growing blueberries to have—as more people know about you wanting to kind of come take a tour of a—of a blueberry patch?

00:39:33

JA: I would say—I would say that they find it—find it out in two ways. They find out the health benefits of the blueberries, and once they found out the health benefits of the blueberries, then they start researching and trying to find a location where they can get them from or pick them on their own. And once they find out about us and then they—they call us. I think the volume of pick-your-own people has increased in the past five years because the first sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years, blueberries were just delicious. But they found out so many medical benefits for blueberries—Stage 3 breast cancer and—and other—other research like that that’s become so strong, how—what a wonderful anti-aging fruit it is with its powerful antioxidants that, as people have found out that fact, they have sought us out.

00:40:39

And so I think our volume is more built from that than the actual experience of wanting to come pick their own because I can deliver it to anybody in Greenwood, you know, any number of berries that they want. But they—they are—the wilderness group who really liked the outdoors, and they’d rather come pick their own fruit. And I think they get a real enjoyment out of picking the fresh fruit right off the bush and putting it in their bucket and taking it home with them. They—they have firsthand knowledge of where that fruit came from, what condition it was in when they picked it, you know, and I think they really enjoy—most of the pick your own people really enjoy that—the outdoor experience.

00:41:28

We try to keep it—we try to keep it better than a commercial environment out here because we know that we’re going to have people during the harvest season that are going to be walking around. Fire ants can be an issue. And so we—we concentrate on things that a normal, if we were just using machinery to pick it and didn’t really anticipate anyone being around, that they would not normally deal with. And of course in dealing with those particular issues like fire

ants, you really can't use the—you can't go to Wal-Mart and buy Amdro [ant killer] because this is a—a food product. So we have to use pheromones and things like that to trick fire ants into believing, you know, that—that they—they don't want to increase their colony size, and they eventually starve themselves and—and die out. So we have to use some really, really good agricultural practices and environmental practices because this is a good group. And—and we're going to have people present on the location.

00:42:34

Although they'll ask me, "Well, you know, it is anything dangerous?" And I'll have to tell them, "Well you are going into the country, and you may see a lizard or a snake or spider," you know, "anything you might find in the country." So I—I don't—I don't try to soften the blow on them or anything, but they have such a good time when they're out here that—that they're not—not too particularly concerned about it. We don't let the grass get all crazy high or anything like that, so they can see where they're going.

00:43:08

We had an issue some years ago with poison ivy and poison oak and some of the stuff creeping out of the woods and getting into our—our fields but we've dealt with that in a—in an aggressive manner, just literally by pulling them out by the roots and making sure they're gone so we don't have that issue anymore like we used to. It's—it's a nice family environment now, I think. We've—we've tried to do that since we saw more people coming.

00:43:38

AES: Well tell me about the decision to handpick for your local Greenwood customers and how long you've done that. Have you always done that?

00:43:45

JA: The group as a whole over twenty-three years has not necessarily done that all the time. But the reason we do it, we were—at one time we would pick by machine and it—the machine deposits in these big thirty-pound lugs in the back of the machine, a variety of qualities of berries. And we would—we would sell those that way, call them machine-picked for a fairly small cost to the consumer, but the consumer would have to go through it and discard what they didn't want and save what they did want, which was a little confusing to first-time people who buy the berries.

00:44:30

And, in fact, a lot of them really didn't want to do it that way. So then we moved to these—all just business decisions—then we moved to setting up the sort tables where we would bring those same machine-picked berries in, put them on a sort table, and then we'd have people—mostly family members and cousins and nephews and all that and they—they would sort through them and—and put them in the waste pile or the to-be-sold pile, you know. And then when I arrived, we did a couple of studies on just efficiency. And it turns out that it took the same length of time to go through that machination of picking by the machine, sorting by hand, putting them in the containers and distributing them to the—to the—to the consumer as it did sorting—picking them directly off the bush by hand, putting them in the bucket, and delivering them to the consumer, taking into account we're having to pay a much larger hourly wage for the hand picking versus running this machine down to the field, who we only have to pay when it breaks down.

00:45:54

But the numbers were there that—that it was just as efficient. So now we—we not only get to hire a—a number of local people during the summertime who need extra money during the

summertime and it can be a—you know a—a teacher on vacation or a college student, you know, locally or visiting their family coming back home, some way they can earn some extra money during the summertime, so we roll money back in the—the—the local economy that way. We get handpicked berries under strict food safety standards that we've established delivered to the consumer. And virtually they have an unblemished fruit right in front of them when they receive it.

00:46:47

Now we actually charge for that—that particular service. We charge about the same thing that you—they would purchase in a—in a grocery store, the fresh picked, but they know they're—the local people know the environment they come from, and those berries are usually delivered to the customer the same day they're picked. And through shipping and processing and whatnot, the ones in the grocery store are quite a few days older than that, so they get just the freshest fruit they could get by us handpicking them and having them—and delivering them that way here locally.

00:47:26

AES: How much is a gallon of fresh picked blueberries?

00:47:30

JA: Well, price-wise? Normally we're charging somewhere in the \$12 to \$15 range. The—the market changes every year, and I'm not very sophisticated in what I do. Right before we start picking, I'll go into the local Piggly Wiggly [grocery store] and look and see what they're selling their blueberries for, and I'll undercut them fractionally, you know, ten or fifteen percent, and that's the way we—that's the way we sell them.

00:48:04

I don't—I want to discourage our local customers from going to the grocery store and buying those berries when they can get them from me. So you know, I don't want them worrying about the price where—whereas the freshness is way beyond anything they could get in a grocery store and seems that, you know, price is always on their—on their mind, so I try to make sure that there's not a price issue. There's certainly not a freshness issue.

00:48:35

Very similar to [a Downtown] Greenwood Farmers' Market experience I had, and of course I participate in the Greenwood Farmers' Market. I like jalapeños. And there's a local dentist who is a vegetable grower and he grows—he likes to grow jalapeños. I really had no idea the difference between the freshness of a fresh grown jalapeño from his farm and that—the jalapeños that I could get at the grocery store. His are remarkably strong, but they're the normal jalapeño you would get at the grocery store. So if there is much—that much difference in his jalapeño than I'm used to in the fresh jalapeño that you can get at the grocery store and my fresh blueberries and the fresh blueberries, the difference has got to be huge, so—. It's—a good local quality food fruit is—is a wonderful thing.

00:49:38

AES: So we haven't—we're just getting to—yeah, here—here. We're just getting to the Farmers' Market after this great conversation about blueberries, but I want to ask you, too, have you always just sold locally, and just speaking locally, have you always just sold from—straight from your farm or have you had any retail outlets that you've sold to over the years?

00:49:58

JA: Oh, okay. No, we have not gone to that extent. We have not tried to enter that market. Although we did have some conversations with local food grocers, grocery stores and distributors, their—their rules and regulations for packaging and delivery and delivery volume were different for every—every supplier and—and chain. Whereas if we join the Mississippi-Louisiana Blueberry Growers Association, and there's a couple other associations here in the South that—that deal with blueberries. I think there's the Southern Blueberry Growers Association. If we—if we got with them, we initially got ourselves into a worldwide marketing situation because that was their responsibility to us was to market worldwide our blueberries growing in Mississippi and Louisiana. So that's—that's why we went with them and—and just eliminated that—that headache of dealing with the—the Wal-Marts and the Kroger's and other outlets that we may or may not have had and let them deal with them. And they collect the money and they—they send the money to us, you know, when the contracts are filled by those—those same ones that we could have gone to ourselves, but it's just easier in a big association like that. The blueberry—the people who want to buy blueberries in—in million-pound lots know where to come, and we're going to participate in providing them with them.

00:51:45

AES: So the blueberries you take to the processing plant, those are then just packaged and sold as Mississippi blueberries? They're not Roebuck Plantation blueberries anymore?

00:51:54

JA: Yeah, they—they lose their particular identity that way. We—our association, MSLOU has actually joined—joined up with Michigan Blueberry Growers Association, and we're now a much, much bigger nationally organization or distributing and marketing—marketing

blueberries. But yes, we do lose our self-identity in that situation. But everybody around here knows us. You know, we've got that identity still. It's—it's—I don't know. It's nice to know that—that the berries that you pick up at your local market are grown in Mississippi, but because we belong to such a big association, it has just the association name on there. It could have been some from Michigan, some from Florida, some from Mississippi. They could be anything from any—any blueberry growers association.

00:52:54

AES: Do you think that that's a handicap for Mississippi blueberries at all to not have the state name attached to the fruit?

00:53:02

JA: I personally don't think so. I think it would be nice to know—for a lot of people to know that Mississippi had a good environment for growing blueberries and that—but I haven't seen—I haven't seen Florida-labeled blueberries. I might be limited in my travels, but I haven't seen Florida-labeled blueberries. I haven't seen Georgia-labeled blueberries. I have seen Michigan blueberries, and we are joined up with them. I have seen New Jersey-labeled blueberries, which is the second-largest state for growing blueberries. And I have seen Washington State blueberries, but the rest of us are kind of, you know, all three musketeers type of all for one and one for all, and so we've kind of given up our individuality in order to—to have a good strong association.

00:53:57

AES: And you just said New Jersey is the second largest producer of blueberries. Is Mississippi the first?

00:54:01

JA: Oh no, Michigan is the—the largest—Michigan and then New Jersey. Mississippi is way down the list, but they have the sweetest. [*Laughs*]

00:54:10

AES: Hmm. Do you have an idea of the oldest grower in Mississippi?

00:54:16

JA: Um, well we call him the grandfather of blueberries in Mississippi. His name is Luis Monterde out of Purvis, Mississippi, and I've—if I'm not certain, he is—he may, indeed, be the first blueberry grower in the State of Mississippi. If he's not, he's certainly the one that got together five or six growers initially and started the Mississippi Blueberry Growers Association.

00:54:48

He is the one that processes all of our berries through his facility so he's—he's—he's taking his revenue on multi-levels. He—he provides services to all the farmers that—that grow it. And it's a service that we all need. It's a service that we can't afford individually, so we actually had to be, you know, a cooperative and we had to have a member in the cooperative. It's—it's not dangerous. [*Laughs*] We had to have a member in the cooperative who was willing to put out millions of dollars in—in his own equipment to—and stick his neck out, so we—we certainly appreciate that—that one individual. His daddy passed away this year also and—and so you know that—that earlier generation is—is leaving us and it's a shame because his dad was—

escaped Cuba before that takeover and brought his family to the United States. And he was as much of a character in his own rights as—as my dad was a character here in Leflore County. And so Mr. Monterde is—we just call him the grandfather of blueberries, the godfather, you know that type of thing.

00:56:14

AES: So do you think if he was the first, would that have been in like 1985 or 1965, or do you have any idea?

00:56:19

JA: No, he was a—no, he wasn't that much ahead of us, but he was ahead of us. I would say he—he probably started in '75, where were in '88. He was—he was already deep in research. He had already put in his plants. He had already made adaptations. That's one thing about Luis, too: he's—he doesn't stand still. We've got the same twenty-three plants—twenty-three-year-old plants we put in, but he's always experimenting with new varieties, putting in land, taking land out, you know, he's a real innovator. Mr. Monterde is—is a true individual, as far as business in the agriculture and horticulture industry. He—he's always looking, always experimenting, always trying to find something.

00:57:12

AES: That's just a fascinating story. All right. So let's get to the [Downtown Greenwood] Farmers' Market. The Farmers' Market opened in or started in 2007, is that right?

00:57:24

JA: I guess. I'm not certain. I don't know. *[Laughs]*

00:57:28

AES: Have you been selling there since the beginning?

00:57:30

JA: No, I—I've only been selling there for two years. Last year they—they really wanted to put some emphasis on the Farmers' Market. They wanted to put some advertisements in the newspaper and pass out some flyers and so they—they knew that we had blueberries, and I'd been selling them locally anyway. So they said, "Well, why don't you—why don't you participate in—in the Farmers' Market?" Actually, participating in the Farmers' Market in my particular environment is a little bit difficult because I have to schedule time away from the field right in the middle of harvest to sell blueberries at the local Farmers' Market.

00:58:18

So it—you know, I have to get everything going down here by—by seven o'clock in the morning and then escape to the Farmers' Market and stay out there until eleven o'clock, which I'm—then I'm supposed to shop for local produce and take it to my mother who loves anything from the Farmers' Market, all the fresh cantaloupes and watermelons and vegetables and my 2 Sisters [in the Kitchen] stuff that they put together, and then come back to the farm and continue harvesting, you know, the rest of the day and whatever we've got going, so—.

00:58:56

But the Farmers' Market thought it was really important that I show up, and it's certainly something that my daddy would have done. So I do it. And I just meet the most wonderful people there. So although it's time away from something I should be doing, it's—it's nice to

meet all those nice people, and they are really wonderful. They always look for me. This year was a little spotty because we had rain on one Saturday, and then another Saturday I had to be gone because my best friend had a relative pass away. So I missed those two weekends on the Farmers' Market and—and I had people calling my house going, “Why weren't you there?” So it was—you know, they expect me to be there now, so I try to be there with as many blueberries as I can. So it—it's interesting meeting all those nice people in Greenwood. And—and you know, they're just health nuts when they walk up there and they—you know they want blueberries and they're all excited about blueberries, so you know that they're for a reason, you know, and then they want that flavor.

01:00:07

By the way, Ocean Spray makes the most wonderful blueberry juice. **[Laughs]** That's about the only one I can find on the grocery store shelves that actually is, you know, full-flavored blueberry juice—Ocean Spray. I love their commercials anyway. **[Laughs]**

01:00:26

AES: Well has working at the Farmers' Market, has that—since you're such an established local grower and people have known about you for so long, has that really broadened your customer base?

01:00:33

JA: It's a different customer base. It's—it's the—the people who might not necessarily remember to call me during picking season, and they are almost always not the people who would come and pick their own, so I guess—I guess by a skosh, it opened up the customer base because they—they like buying fresh stuff there in the local market, and they know mine is fresh

and—and the ones that come there on a regular basis and the ones that just happen up on the—the little stand there with the blueberries are always delighted and surprised.

01:01:16

I would say the—the ones the most delighted and surprised are the out of town people who are there staying at the Alluvian or some local hotel and—and I originally was just bringing gallon bags of—of blueberries and selling them that way. And I realized that not everybody was prepared to buy a gallon bag of blueberries, although they freeze wonderfully, just—just take the bag home and put it in your freezer. And—and they come out like little BBs. But there were people there who were actually buying an amount for breakfast that day. And so I started bringing little pints and quarts, you know, and repackaging it so it was a little more convenient to them.

01:02:01

So it's mostly the out of town people that—that are most surprised by it, and it's always talking to—where you're from and, you know, why are you here, and of course we just had *The Help* [movie production] leave, that—that movie group and that was nice having them. A lot of them showed up for the Greenwood Farmers' Market every Saturday and nice talking to them on a—on a non-film basis, you know, and just getting to know them as human beings and not all these stars. **[Laughs]**

01:02:36

AES: Yeah, so—so let's talk about kind of Greenwood's renaissance, you know, and what's going on here and has been going on here and how the Farmers' Market fits into that. Can you talk about that in a general way?

01:02:50

JA: Well I—I really—gosh, all these philosophical questions. *[Laughs]*

01:02:58

AES: I'm sorry.

01:03:00

JA: I'm—I really haven't—I really haven't contemplated it. Of course we've all stood around and watched Downtown Greenwood re-grow and Main Street Greenwood and the—and the Chamber of Commerce have been really instrumental in bringing in a lot of activities that—for entertainment, both for out of town people to come to Greenwood and the in-town people to—to participate in as we have—we're small agrarian town that doesn't have a lot of entertainment. In fact we don't even have a movie theater in our—in our wonderful city. So they've been—Main Street Greenwood and—and the Chamber of Commerce has been really instrumental in bringing in, and I believe Main Street Greenwood was instrumental in contacting as many farmers as they could with specialty items trying to get them to come in and—and do it.

01:04:03

So I think it's just one more step in—in bringing the town to a whole, instead of scattered little pockets and pieces. The Farmers' Market is—is located right on a—on an old abandoned railroad track, which they—they cannot figure—the City Council and supervisors can't figure out what to do with that abandoned track so we—we get to utilize a huge open space where everybody in town and for the most part is within walking distance of anybody there or certainly bicycle distance. Anybody there in Greenwood who wants to come and pick up fresh produce and odd little items they—right now they've limited it to fresh produce. And there—there are

other people that would like to participate, arts and crafts and all that kind of stuff. I'm not sure that that's really the direction that the Farmers' Market wants to go in at this time. It may sometime in the future, but right now it's just concentrating on local farmers, local produce, you know, whatever you got.

01:05:14

But we draw from six or seven counties around. People come to that Farmers' Market, so it's not too bad. Not every—not everybody can have a little garden or has the ability. Elderly people who can't—who used to love to garden who can't garden anymore will show up at the Farmers' Market and get all this wonderful produce that they, you know, remember from growing up. So I think it's a great step for the City of Greenwood.

01:05:43

AES: What do you think it's done for people as individuals in like talking and thinking about diet and all these issues lately about food access especially in the Mississippi Delta and places like Greenwood and places outside of Greenwood, what the—what kind of role the Farmers' Market has played for those folks?

01:06:03

JA: Well it's—it's certainly made it more accessible to the—to the local people for fresh produce. I know a lot of us see in the newspapers and on television some concerns and worries about blueberries grown in Chile or—they're fine producers. There's nothing wrong with those but you always wonder if you—this gives you access to the person who actually grew the berries. You can ask them questions, you know. "Is it all organic? Do you use any pesticides?" And—and those farmers, whether or not they do it those ways or use those things, can answer

those questions truthfully. And, you know, somebody who—who is really concerned about those particular items can get those questions answered directly, whereas if you go to a grocery store, although the items are delicious and—and quality items you just—you don't know. You've got no way.

01:07:05

And then you get to see some of the people who—who have grown those things and you get to know those people. And so I—I think it's a good thing; I—blueberries are—are wonderful health products, and that's the reason we're there is because people are seeking out those wonderful healthy, healthy items. But I don't—I don't have canned peaches and things like that because that's just not something I do, so I'm there providing those health conscious people with the blueberries, but there's just as many that eat them, not because of the health but just because of the good taste. They just love the flavor.

01:07:46

AES: Have you ever had the opportunity to visit other Farmers' Markets that are cropping up in the Delta?

01:07:51

JA: Not in the Delta. I haven't visited those. My sister who lives in Grenada says there's—either one is just opening or about to open or has just opened already in Grenada. So I'm interested in—in seeing that one. And there's a lot more hill folks that are not concentrating on cotton and soybeans and whatnot, like we are down here in the Delta. And so those people tend to have larger gardens and a more diverse selection of what they grow in their gardens. So that ought to be interesting. I've—I've elbowed my way through the one in Jackson, and that thing is so huge

I'm just—I just I don't get the personal environment. Although when you actually stop and talk to one of those vendors, you do. But it's just so big there in Jackson that it's a little put-offish, if you're used to a small Farmers' Market, like you would in Grenada or Greenwood.

01:08:50

AES: Would there be anything that you might say that makes the Greenwood Market special or unique? Blueberries, of course.

01:08:58

JA: Oh, yeah [*Laughs*] Other than blueberries? Well it's just—it's just the people who grow, who live here in this area. You've got daughters of doctors. You've got retired farmers. You've got a dentist who would—loves to garden, who has a huge vegetable garden that he brings there. I mean you have a diverse group of people. Spooney [Kenter] who—who brings barbecue to the Greenwood Farmers' Market who is an institution here in the City of Greenwood. And if you're lucky enough to be from out of town and come to our Market and you meet Spooney, you'll know where to go get barbecue next time you're in Greenwood. It's just almost every one of those vendors has some little story very similar to that.

01:09:48

Let me see if I can think of—we have the—the lady that I mentioned that was the daughter of a doctor is also the wife of a farmer, but she's there in a—a Greenwood Horticulture Society-type of fashion in that you can pick up two- and three-year-old cypress trees that she's grown there in her yard and potted, and she brings them up there and—and she'll either raffle them away for free or just hand them out. And, you know, just unique people and every—every local Farmers' Market will be that way. But it's—it's the people.

01:10:30

AES: So do you think—you know, you said it's kind of hard for you to hustle and get things going during peak season to work the Market, but since your season is so short, do you kind of miss that you're not part of the Market for the whole season of the Market?

01:10:46

JA: Yeah. Yeah, I do. I—that—that is a shame. I'm—I don't know of a way to deliver fresh produce out of season—yet. I'm sure that they're going to be inventing something. But you know, space-dried or something. But yeah, I do miss that. And if it's a longer—if it had been a longer season, the full eight weeks, you know, you get to—get to know everybody up there. You learn what their family is doing next weekend. And it would be nice if our season wasn't so short. Yeah, I would definitely participate in the—in the Farmers' Market all year long.

01:11:24

Now that I've gotten—and the first year was a little hectic; this year was not quite as hectic—you kind of get into what you have to do on Thursday and then again on Friday in order to make the Farmers' Market on Saturday. So yeah, it—it's a little less, and I'm sure it'll be nothing, you know, in four or five years for me to participate, but right now it's—you know, my father passing away and picking up the farm and having to revamp and redo a lot of what he did to—to fit what I can and can't do. He had a lot of talents I didn't have. And I had some talents that he didn't have. And so blending it together with my brother and myself, blending what we've lost with my father in a workable manageable situation, both from marketing and growing, has been a little bit tricky in the past two years. But family members have been a big help and

my brother has been a monster help, you know, in that type of stuff, so it's—it's—it's working out.

01:12:27

AES: What's your brother's name?

01:12:28

JA: John Edwin Gilliam Ashcraft. Everybody calls him Gilliam. He's—there were so many John(s) in our family—we had one of those pick-ones, but he's actually named after—I'm named after one grandfather, John Dunklin Ashcraft and he's named—named after another grandfather, John Edwin Gilliam out of Richmond, Virginia. It just so happens that the family loves John, so—. *[Laughs]*

01:12:55

AES: So when your father passed, were you living on the [Gulf] Coast? Let me get my timeline straight here. Were you living on the coast when the blueberry farm started, or when did you first get involved?

01:13:06

JA: All right. We had the discussion in [19]87 about starting this project, but we never could get a real start date figured. And by '88 we figured that November of '88 was when we were going to put it in the—into the ground. We had a lot of prep work, bury all the pipes and everything, so we had to start in the spring of '88 in order to prepare the ground and get all the pipes laid underground. So I was living on the coast at that time, so once we had a date scheduled for us to

start I—my entire family moved back up here, came back home, and—and we started it then—the spring of '88.

01:13:54

AES: So was that an attractive proposition for you? Were you ready to come back home and—and farm?

01:14:00

JA: Well—.

01:14:02

AES: Or was it a responsibility more?

01:14:03

JA: No, it wasn't. No, I was a well-grown man by that time. It would seem something that my father sincerely—sincerely wanted to do and—and it was—it was a real nice thing for him to ask me if I wanted to participate, you know, on an equal-type of basis. And so I made—made the effort to come back and—and participate with him. You don't get—you don't get a chance—I don't think everybody gets a chance to participate in something your father really has an interest in and your brother has an interest in and you have—my only interest was I love blueberries. I like the taste of them. So agriculture wasn't new to me, and we had the land, so it didn't seem like a real big proposition to do it. It was just, you know, making the commitment and moving. And so yeah, it was nice to—it was nice to start a business with my dad and my brother. That was a lot of fun.

01:15:11

AES: And so this—this isn't a very polite question, so I apologize, but I'm wondering about, you know, with the short growing season and all the work you put into it, how, you know, from an economic standpoint if it—if growing—farming blueberries is a good living or if it's something that supplements leasing the rest of this land out.

01:15:29

JA: Oh, no, the—leasing the rest of the—leasing the rest of the land out is family business. This—the growing the blueberries is a different option altogether, although it's still inside the family, the finances are completely, you know, separated from all that—all that other stuff.

01:15:47

This was originally an entertainment for my dad that we thought we could make money on. And you can—you can make money doing this. You have to size your property right. You—you have a certain amount of cost that you have—are going to have in every acre that you deal with and the costs are really expensive right at the start. The first three or four years when you don't have a crop at all is the hardest thing to do. Somehow or other you have to—if you're thinking about it as a business, you have to find some way to feed your family for the first you know three or four years when you—when they're little shorties and they're not putting out very many berries because the first—it was three years before we picked our first crop.

01:16:38

And every—every berry that was picked that year was picked by some relative of mine: my wife, my children, my mom, my dad—my mom, my dad. My mom, I still can't you know get over here actually coming to the field and handpicking blueberries. My mother-in-law, my

father-in-law, aunts, uncles, nephews—every relative we could get came here, and we had 3,000 plants in the ground and really we had to handpick them. So we were trying to cut costs and they were—they were just literally volunteering their time, you know, to try to help get this thing get up and off the ground.

01:17:20

But there are business decisions that you have to make when you are—are doing this. The more you can do yourself, the less labor you—you have to pay out. As you get in age—this is all bend over, stand up. You see these bruised arms? You get beat up the bushes. So as you get older and you can afford it, you know, you hire other people to help you out and you supervise them and—and—. So you have—it's a—it's a real financial—you have to be careful with how you do it.

01:17:58

Now one—one thing we save on—on greatly is we don't—these things don't have a lot of natural enemies and pests, other than armadillos that dig holes and wrench your ankles. They don't have a lot of—so we don't—we don't have to spray them with chemicals. So that—that holds down on the cost that Michigan and—and New Jersey are not able to get away with because they do have insects and pests that attack these naturally. And but here in the Mississippi Delta, I don't know if it's my next door neighbor spraying his cotton and soybeans, and he takes out all the insects before they can get to me, but he's extremely careful about spraying around my plants with—. I don't know if it's what the farmers in the Delta normally do that keeps these things from happening to me. We've had one attack by one insect in twenty-three years, and we handled it, you know, very quickly. It took us about a day to correct the issues, so—.

01:19:02

And everything is a business decision and you should try to get—you should try to sell as much as you can locally because you'll get the top dollar there, and you'll get your repeat customers there. But if you're going to go in a big commercial business like this you need to have some outlet where you can get rid of everything that you cannot sell locally. And you have to be big enough where when you tell them you're going to bring them a load they're—they're counting on fifteen tons from you because, if you belong to a big association and you want to bring them 1,000 pounds for the season, they really you know they—they don't really want you. They—it's too much paperwork keeping up with your 1,000 pounds when you got other—other farmers bringing them you know 20, 30, 50, 100 tons than to keep up with your 1,000 pounds. So you have to size your property right according to where you plan to market your berries.

01:20:06

Now if you're going to big enough where you can be commercial, you can also take up the local market as well because you'll have—you'll have the berries to—to provide the local market. But if you're just going local market, you'll have the berries to provide it, but you won't have—you won't have access to income from a big volume of berries, so you're really going to have to do it—a lot of it yourself.

01:20:35

The—the planting, the weeding, the pruning, all the normal—the harvesting, you got to think of some way to harvest. You have to have—if you're going to use a picker, you have to be big enough to pay for a picker like that. Now you can get a small picker for a reasonable amount. The ones that Mr. Monterde uses—used cost \$125,000. Some of the brand new ones that run on nothing but air and hydraulics are a quarter-million dollars. So you know, these are all just business decisions, and you try to make as many business decisions as you can before you get into it—size your property correctly. And you can always expand, provided you've got that as

part of your plan, too, because, you know, we got all the rest of this land. We can expand any—any size we wanted to.

01:21:30

AES: So are you—are you blueberry man all year long, or are there other things that you do in the off-season?

01:21:35

JA: My wife thinks I'm a blueberry man all year long. [*Laughs*] Personally, I like the National Football League during November, December, and January. [*Laughs*]

01:21:45

AES: All right. I know your priorities. So I want to back up to—about your local customers because I know that Taylor Bowen Ricketts at Delta Bistro [in Greenwood] buys from you. Tell me about that relationship and if you sell to other restaurants in the area and how that part of your business is kind of new and different and how that happened.

01:22:06

JA: Oh, all right. I'd eaten at the Delta Bistro several times. I happen to personally like Taylor's cuisine. And I don't remember if she approached me at the Farmers' Market or she called me on the telephone or if she is a person that Daddy had been marketing to before I came—just before I came along. I'm not certain exactly how that arrangement came about. But once she started cooking with blueberries and people started to know that they could get something of the blueberry in some portion of her fare there at the Delta Bistro, her—her volume started

increasing on the sale. So the first—first time I actually took her some, it was fresh blueberries during—during the season. And of course when the season was over, she was out of blueberries, and she was ordering these huge boxes that she didn't have storage room for through—through one of the major suppliers for the food industry. And she didn't want to buy that big a volume.

01:23:19

And she—and when she did, she didn't have any place to store it because it's a small kitchen she's got. It's very special. And so I said, "Well, look, I'll just take next year"—because we were already done that year—I said, "Well, next year I'll just take some of the handpicked ones we got, and I'll just freeze them for you like you would normally freeze them. I'll just freeze them for you and just bring them to you when you need them." And so now I every season I—well now this is the second season—I handpick enough of what she plans on using for the year, and I just freeze them and store them for her and take them to her. I don't charge her for them unless she actually uses them. But I hope to get Viking [Range Corporation] on board with the thing. They have a wonderful chef there at Giardina's [Restaurant]. I'm drawing a blank on his name right now, a young guy, very—.

01:24:17

AES: Nick Seabergh.

01:24:17

JA: Nick Seabergh, yeah. Yeah, Nick Seabergh. And he's a—he's a good chef like—although Taylor is—she experiments with taste combinations that you would not normally expect. They're just out of this world, the combinations she puts together. You wouldn't think—these three items together would be a meal, would be the right combination for a meal and yet, when you finish

with her—her presentation it just—it’s—it’s full, it’s complete. You’ve got every flavor you needed. It just—so, she’s really a talented chef, and I’m just delighted that she’s willing to use our blueberries.

01:25:01

AES: And what kinds of things has she done with your blueberries?

01:25:04

JA: Well the only thing I’ve eaten is blueberry crisp. But she’s constantly doing things over at Viking and making salads. I don’t think she’s made the one my mother likes. My mother likes an interesting salad, and she likes oil and vinegar; she likes oil and vinegar as—as a dressing but she likes sliced cucumbers, melons, and blueberries in her salad. And—and she says if she can get pickled cucumbers in her salad that the sweetness of the blueberries and the tartness of the pickled cucumbers are really make—you know interesting. But there are so many blueberry recipes out there. And it’s, you know, it’s a long ways to go in having fun with those.

01:25:54

AES: Do you eat blueberries every day?

01:25:55

JA: No, I don’t.

01:25:59

AES: Do you like blueberries?

01:26:00

JA: I love blueberries. I like blueberries a lot but I—I get so much blueberries. I'll tell you something I do consume every day and that's cranberry juice, which is very similar in—in antioxidants and health benefits and not quite up to the level of blueberry but they're—they're wonderful—liver and kidneys and things like that. So I drink a lot of cranberry juices as my substitute because frankly, I get overload in blueberries, and I do eat a lot of blueberries, but every day—no. I don't, uh-uh.

01:26:39

AES: Well we were—I wanted to ask you earlier about if you're a blueberry man all year long or you do anything else in the off-season. We talked for a second before we started recording about muscadines. Can you tell me about that again?

01:26:49

JA: Oh, I just happened to—the last week or two I was—since you mentioned that, you know, it was such a short season—I mentioned it was such a short season, and I was—I was trying to picture in my mind something else that might be able to be grown. We have some poor dirt further down in the field that's really not great blueberry dirt. They struggle on them. They produce, but you really have to pay attention to the plants in order to get them to do right.

01:27:19

Something that would be in a different marketing window, which we—for muscadines would be August, late August, early September, so we would be through with the blueberries and move to the muscadines. It's just a possibility. I'm looking for something else to put in. We

already have an underground watering system. I've always admired the—the grape fields in—in California and how well they tend them. They have individual watering systems for each one of their—their plants and—to me, growing muscadines would be grown the same ways as those—those vineyards of California would be. And muscadine is a great Southern fruit, just absolutely wonderful and just—I can't tell you the number of days I've been hunting in—in the forest and stopped under a muscadine vine and just picked all I could pick because I just love that tart sensation, snappy sensation from the thick skin of the outside and the grape-like quality on the inside of the muscadine.

01:28:32

So I just don't know—I don't know yet. I'm going to have to ask around if there's a—there's a local market for it because, you know, we're all Southern down here, and we all know where a muscadine is, so I'm not certain that there's—would be a local market for them. But it's one of those research things. And just like starting with the blueberries, you'd have to ask around and do a little research and put some numbers down on a piece of paper and see if you can make a go of it.

01:28:57

AES: Have you ever tried to make a blueberry wine with your blueberries?

01:29:00

JA: I'm currently trying to make it now. Several of our producers in MSLOU do make their own wine. And there is one local guy here who picks—comes out and picks my blueberries and makes wine. That's all he does is he makes wine from the blueberries. I haven't had an opportunity to sample his wine yet. The producer in South Mississippi who uses his own

blueberries makes some really good wine, and it's more of an aperitif because it's so sweet, but as I understand it you can make it a little bit drier than that. I don't—but I'm currently making it—my wife goaded me into it this summer, so I'm making a little sample size, you know, and just two gallons just to see what it's like, you know. But, like I said, I'm sure it'll taste like blueberries [*Laughs*].

01:29:56

AES: Well when your father passed, was there any question about keeping this business going, or did you have to kind of stop and think for a minute?

01:30:04

JA: Well I don't guess I really stopped to think about it a minute. I don't guess there was any question, although I did bring the question up in my own mind and was this something I was going to be willing to do. Because up until he passed away, I was the bookkeeper. I kept him up on Federal regulations, chemical-wise, reporting to the IRS, making sure all the books were kept straight, you know, keeping—keeping him out of jail because he—he's a—he's a—he was a real people person. So he was really concentrated in that area. I mean all three of us had our own specialties and my brother is a mechanical genius, and I'm just willing to go and do it. And I'm willing to do—I'm willing to put out labor, and I could do books and read Federal regulations. And my father was a real people person. So we had all three things necessary in there, so when we lost him—my brother is a real people person, but he's got a full-time job. And I was—was—had twenty-six years in with Federal Express, and I attempted that first summer to blend Federal Express, my—my job with Federal Express and farming together. And that's where my son

really stepped to the front and surprised me. And—good dude. Anyway, he—he helped his dad, you know.

01:31:40

That just—that just didn't go very well. There was just too much time away from the farm. Although my son was doing a great job, I just couldn't input enough of what I really wanted done here, and so I retired. I was eligible to retire from Federal Express and—and took this up. But that was the only way that I was going to be able to do that was give something up. I mean I have a full family and I was you know—my mother was going to need some help, Daddy passed away, and—and I had a full-time job and this is—this is a full-time labor intensive job here in the field, so I had to give something up so that's—. So I made the choice of giving that up and—and come farm.

01:32:32

Now my brother wanted to do that too but he—he doesn't have enough years in to retire from Federal Express, so I encouraged him to, you know, stay with his job. He's got three almost grown children and it was important that he keep the good benefits that he was getting from that—that job and not risk going out on his own. And so I encouraged him to stay and he's—. It all seems to be working out okay. But we—we miss Daddy, yeah.

01:33:05

AES: I bet. What do you think he would think about—I mean it's only been two years but y'all—I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't get to meet him, too, yeah.

01:33:20

JA: I would hope he's patting me on the back. All my brothers and sisters, my brother and my three sisters, my mom—you know, they—they—they think it's great you know. I just hope he does. That's the one that made a difference to me. So I moved back up here in '88, you know, to—to be with him and—and start this project, so you know it—he's the one that it would make a difference to. So I hope he thinks I'm doing good. You know, I'm the not the people person he was. I'm more the businessperson and get it done and work hard, you know, and keep your nose to the grindstone, that type of stuff, whereas he was a real people person. I'm not quite that—that caliber but we—everybody already knew that so—. **[Laughs]** That's not surprised anybody. So I'm working on that little aspect of my, you know—. And the Farmers' Market helps in that, you know. You—you meet a lot of people at the Farmers' Market, interesting people, so—.

01:34:25

If it's me, it's more likely I would just machine pick them all and take them to the—to the—to the co-op and—and be done with it, but the fact of the matter is that the income from selling locally is much better than it is selling it through the co-op, so yeah, that's where my focus has to be.

01:34:53

AES: What does the future of Roebuck Blueberry Plantation look like?

01:34:56

JA: I think it needs to be resized a little bit. I think we need to at—at least double the size of it. The margin per acre, the—the amount of profits you get per acre is—is marginal but this size—this size acreage and watching your pennies on labor, purchased labor and machinery that you buy don't—don't buy new equipment unless you—well it's great. President Obama gave us all a

benefit this year in that if you bought equipment for your—your business this year, you could write it off in one year, so you take those types of opportunities that—that you're offered and try to fit them in as best you can and scrimp pennies. So the margin per acre, it can be a little tight, as far as raising a family and I would say you need—you and your wife need to be semi-retired, if you're going to do a project like this.

01:36:10

The problem is now, you're of age and age has its restrictions, so you're going to have to hire some labor, if you wait until that time period. And so the labor is going to eat into your profits. So again, I think we have a little bit of a sizing issue here. And at least—at least be another 6,000 or 7,000 bushes. And first year when Daddy passed away, we didn't have any opportunity to—to see what this thing would actually turn out. Last year we had a record harvest for the number of berries—pounds of berries that we delivered both to the local and to the—the co-op. And we were hoping to have an additional record this year, but we were down ten percent. We had a late rainy season here, and it causes some damage to the berries, so we weren't able to deliver the last ten percent of our crop down there. So this—this fall we're re-pruning the plants and trying to maneuver them and reshape them to harvest more of the berries through the machine than—. They were so big last year, the bushes were so big last year, and we don't think we got the volume off the bushes that were available. It just—the machine couldn't handle it, so we're trying to reshape the bushes so that it fits the machine better. We can harvest more of those berries, and if we can get vigorous growth on these bushes, we should—we should have a good new—new crop coming up this season, so—. We're looking forward to next—next spring and—and a new crop.

01:37:54

But it's all—it's all a learning process. You know, it's all business decisions and how can you maneuver—you know, can you maneuver your plants to produce more, can you make the—the prices higher, can you turn more into the local market, more into the co-op, so it's always business decisions.

01:38:14

Last winter I spent almost all winter researching—researching blueberries and how to handle them in storage facilities and how to build a storage facility, cooling units, which we do not have yet—cooling units for holding the—the berries longer. So I guess I spent November, December, and January, you know, doing research. My wife says I don't do anything [*Laughs*] but watch football, but you know there's—there's not a whole lot to do out here in the field. They're sitting out here and they're getting cold and they're loving it, and so you—you leave it alone.

01:38:56

AES: Yeah, well I'm—my memory card is about to be full here, and I hate to rush out of this. But I—there's one more question I want to ask you, and it's kind of a big one. And we've been talking for a while, so thank you for your time, but I wonder if, you know, I asked you about the future of Roebuck Farms, but what do you think about the future of farming in the Delta and how farming in the Delta has changed over the years?

01:39:20

JA: Oh, well. Hey, I was born in [19]52, so I still remember single-row cotton pickers. Mr. Makamson, our next door neighbor, one of our next door neighbor farmers was one of the first in

the Delta to have a—a mechanized machine. So we would hire him to come over and help—help pick crops here in the—on the farm.

01:39:44

But it's gone more mechanized, and there was one year my next-door neighbor, his son was the only one in the field. He was driving the—the tractor, the—the buggy, the combine, so it—it had gone from sixty-seven people living on a farm down to three or four people and all family. Of course—.

01:40:07

[End John Ashcraft-1; Begin John Ashcraft-2]

00:00:02

AES: All right. This is Amy Evans Streeter back again with Mr. John Ashcraft and we got cut off. My memory card got full, so we just dumped the audio and are back to—to finish off this interview. And you got cut off, Mr. Ashcraft, talking about—we were talking about how agriculture in the Delta has changed and what the future of agriculture in the Delta might be.

00:00:25

JA: Right. I—I think the crops that are growing in the Delta are pretty much going to remain the same. Like I said, it's gotten fairly mechanized since 1947 and 1952. It used to take sixty people and now my recent memory—my next door neighbor, his son did the entire harvest all by himself, all you know 1,000 acres of—of soybeans and 1,200 acres of corn and that—that type of thing.

00:00:56

So it's—it's become highly mechanized. I think it's still a tough business because with that mechanization becomes additional costs. Those machines have become quite expensive. The newest, latest cotton picker now costs \$650,000, so I think it's become more mechanized. I don't think the crops are going to necessarily change, so the current demand is worldwide for food and clothing crops, which we pretty much specialize in here in the Delta.

00:01:34

So I don't—I don't foresee that changing. I'm sure some of the environmental concerns will change how farming is—is being done. Although it's gotten so—so careful these days with the—the chemicals and the—and the—the carbon displacement from running tractors, the number of times over the field has been decreased. Most of them have cut back by half or even seventy-five percent. They don't make as many trips over the field. I think those aspects will continue changing, but I don't—I don't think many of the crops are going—are going to change here in the Delta. I don't—I don't foresee it.

00:02:18

AES: Are there any other kind of smaller scale crops like blueberries or, you know, sweet potatoes that—that Mississippi is getting to be more well known for that is getting up there with cotton and catfish?

00:02:35

JA: Well of course over in the Aberdeen area and Pontotoc area it just—they're just world renowned for their sweet potatoes. I mean it's hard not to think of sweet potatoes in—in some—some aspect of Mississippi. I don't know of anything. They've tried—they've tried peanuts and

it's just really not the environment and—and really not the government program support in the peanut industry. The Delta is pretty much shut out of that—that industry.

00:03:10

I think more of the farmers are taking some of their marginal lands and turning it over to semi-use of the government and in CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] land crop protection, conservation programs where the silt run-off into the neighboring lakes and rivers is not what it used to be and—and the government has given the farmers money to take that land out of—of normal agriculture and put it into trees and shrubs and whatnot just—just wasteland but the—the farmers are using their really, really marginal land, heavy clays and gumbos that—well, I always have struggled to grow a crop of any sort in—moving those into CRP. So you're seeing a lot more green growth in the state of Mississippi as—as farmers are encouraged to take out that—that marginal land.

00:04:14

That's always a plus for getting rid of CO2 and turning it into good old oxygen. But I don't—I don't see a whole lot of—a whole lot of stuff changing or I don't see anything particularly catching on. It's a nice catch on the—the sweet potatoes but I—you don't hear about a lot of radishes, or you don't hear about a lot of lettuce. You just—you know, maybe small farmers like myself in a hole in the wall somewhere that might be doing something like that, but you just don't hear about any big markets taking over where cotton and soybeans and corn—.

00:04:54

Corn—corn hasn't been as big in the Delta as it has been since we started stressing gasohol. That—the price of corn has just driven up the number of acres in the Delta that planted in corn. But you know, if that ever goes away, I'm sure it'll just go back to milo or—or soybeans, which is a food product again itself and cotton, which is clothing. And it'll be

something like that. They're talking switchgrass, but that's going to be for ethanol production, and that's going to be a real business decision.

00:05:31

You have to—have to put in a crop that's going to make you more money before you take out a crop that is making you money. That's just—there's no other way. So it's going to have to—they're going to have to see their way to—to make money in order to change, and right now I just don't see much of anything changing.

00:05:50

AES: Do you foresee big growth in the blueberry industry in Mississippi?

00:05:54

JA: Well, the way the industry is building, well the industry is only building because of the response that the—that the consumer is out there. They—they want it. They're demanding it. I'm sure it will continue to—to expand. I don't know about here in the Delta. Again, it's—it's a tradeoff of land use, and you know what can you get out of this crop versus if you got specialized areas where you got a good—good crop but you can't get tractors in there it's—it's a good place to put it for blueberries, especially since they're becoming in such high demand. We've got the best prices this year that we've—we've ever gotten for our process berries, our frozen berries, going on the commercial market. And—and the only thing that can stop that kind of price for us is more—more volume. I'm sure people are planting some today that they weren't planting yesterday, and I see that industry rising. But I don't—I don't see it in the Delta. I see it in the places where you can't grow the kinds of crops we grow here in the Delta being planted and in

South Mississippi and some of the sandier soils that are more conducive to bushes and shrubs and whatnot, I see that growing down there, yeah.

00:07:17

AES: Do you think that it is possible in the future and that it would be a benefit in the future to have a specific state label on your blueberries? Like for sweet potatoes I know there are people in Mount Bayou who are looking to market Mound Bayou sweet potatoes. And do you think that—that is something that is maybe in the future of the blueberry business in the state?

00:07:39

JA: I think it would be really nice for Mississippi if we could have those *Grown in Mississippi* blueberry labels on there. But I'm not so certain that it was going to make any difference in the price of the berries that the farmers get or—or any aspect. Pride in Mississippi is a wonderful thing. My wife and I go snow skiing and she wears *It's yours in Mississippi* tee-shirts all the time in Colorado and places where we go snow skiing, so we carry that—that message with us where we go. But I'm not so certain that it would be anything other than like a chic-type of thing to have. It would be great to go into Colorado and be able to buy blueberries that were grown in Mississippi. That would be wonderful, you know, because I would definitely buy those labeled that way. And it would be an incentive for me to buy those particular berries. I agree with that.

00:08:38

But I—I don't know if it's going to change the worldwide aspect of the—of the marketing that it would really have any effect on us at all. We'd have to—we'd have to come up with our own marketing program over and above what's already out there, which is substantial to market Mississippi blueberries, you know, under a particular singular label.

00:09:01

AES: Hmm. Well, I promised that we'd be wrapping this up, and I so appreciate the generous offer of your time here this morning. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that has to do with blueberries or your family that you want to make sure to mention or anything that I may not have known to ask?

00:09:18

JA: During the pollination season, the thing that works best for pollinating blueberry plants is a thing called a blueberry bumblebee, which is about half the size of our good old Mississippi Delta bat-them-down-with-a-baseball type of bumblebee. They—they got the right size snout on there for the elongated flowers, and the local honeybee is a little short-snouted, so we're a little short in supply on that, the—the blueberry bumblebee. But I've seen some lately—natively here in—in our field and I hope we're getting some colonies built out in the—in the woods close by that—that will be helping us out in the future.

00:10:04

AES: Have you ever considered beekeeping to have those bees?

00:10:08

JA: I have anaphylactic shock to bee stings and [*Laughs*] I—

00:10:15

AES: So I should have been nervous with all these bees buzzing around us today. [*Laughs*]

00:10:17

JA: But I have a—I have a local friend—we did have a—we did have a lot of blueberry beehives out here up until two years ago. He—the—the beekeeper got a little ill and had to retire. I have local—I have a local friend here who is kind of interested. He’s got a number of hives and he’s kind of interested in—in doing it. I’m going to encourage him this year, I think. We’re probably going to split the cost of it or something—something financial along that line of buying a couple colonies of the blueberry bumblebee and see if we can’t get them in here just by bringing them in, rather than waiting for them to arrive.

00:10:58

You know, that’s—that’s a good idea. We’ve been discussing it—a local guy, a good guy, so it might work out pretty well.

00:11:05

AES: Well and then you might—could start thinking about having another product that would be your blueberry blossom honey.

00:11:12

JA: Yeah. Yeah, that would be real good at the Farmers’ Market, I think. I’m not sure it has any particular blueberry flavor to it, but, as I understand it, it does carry a lot of—a lot of the—the blueberry nutrient qualities with it and embeds it in the honey. I’m not sure you can actually pick up the blueberry flavor out of the honey, but you can always put blueberries on honey, so—

[Laughs] Yeah, it—it’s a good product and labeled that way and we could even—Mississippi Blueberry Blossom—take up on your thing, you know, the Mississippi label.

00:11:53

AES: Mississippi Delta Blueberry Blossom Honey. *[Laughs]* All right. Well, I—unless there’s anything else left, I thank you for your time, again, and you told great stories, and it’s been a pleasure to visit with you. And thank you for letting me twist your arm to meet you in the—the blueberry bushes. *[Laughs]*

00:12:09

JA: You’re more than welcome. Come back any time.

00:12:12

AES: Thank you.

00:12:14

[End John Ashcraft-2 Interview]