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Interview with Lawrence and Isabel Simmons

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Casey Lewis
ANSO 67-68
Interview with Lawrence and Isabel Simmons
Monday, January 29th, 1996; 2:00 PM

CL: On the phone you mentioned that you grew up on a farm and your parents were full-time farmers, is that right?

LS: Well, yes, in a way he was... I guess you'd call him a backyard farmer.

CL: And what do you mean by a backyard farmer?

LS: Anybody that has any land that they wanted them to put a crop out on or he could put a crop out on why he would put a crop out on this land. And, of course, it wasn't big commercial like it is today because that was way back in the teens.

CL: How many acres was it?

LS: Oh it... I don't know because he either rented it or they let him put it in, you know, for free. And we always had cows and we sold milk. Not big, just milk to the neighbors. And he always had a team of horses- he never had anything but horses to farm with. No tractors. When I came on I got a tractor.

CL: So, did he have other employment then?

LS: Garbage and trash disposal business and farm. And that's the way it kinda rubbed off on me, I guess. But he did it with horses and I started doing it with trucks.

CL: Growing up, did you live on the same land that you do now or that you own now?

LS: I bought this- he never owned the farm. We lived on this street here really. It was rural but almost then. I've always lived all my life (on this street) and I'm 81-years-old.

CL: So, you lived on this street, on Pleasant?

LS: Oh, yeah.

CL: You can speak, Isabel.

IS: He lived at 110 and we live at 202. Five houses away. He's never been off of this street.

LS: I built this before I got married. So, that's the way things happen here. And I bought the farm in '49... that's when I bought the farm.

CL: And is the farm you bought the same farm that your father farmed on?

LS: Oh, no. This farm that I bought... we feed... there wasn't anyway of getting rid of the garbage but to feed it to hogs back then. In fact I started feeding hogs in '35 and it was on another guys place. Then, he bought this farm and then he decided he wanted to go out West and so then I bought the farm from him so that I would have a place to feed hogs. I feed hogs there until '52 and then they had this outbreak of I think it was called Tricanosis (?). It was a virus that hogs eating the flesh of infected hogs and that was spreading a virus so the only way could keep on feeding garbage was to cook it. So, I didn't want to do that so then I just quit feeding garbage to the hogs. Then I got more into beef cattle and horses and chickens- I raised chickens for several years. That was it, I guess.

CL: How did you become interested in the farming? Because of your father?

LS: Well, I guess you always have something that you feel like you always wanted to do. I don't know, it seemed like people that we knew, a lot of them owned a farm but they lived in town, you know. And they had a tenant farmer or something- they didn't do it themselves. I just thought that sounded great. I raised it all, you know. The different crops. Of course, it wasn't on a scale like they raise today. But back in that time you thought if you put in 10 acres of corn and you seeded your ground with oats and then you made a pint of clover with the oats and you made the hay off of it the next year. That was basically the way that you did it. But its no comparison with the way they farm today.

CL: Do you still own the property? How many acres?

LS: 75 acres. I rent the farm land to a dairy farmer now. He pastures... I got a pasture there and he pastures his replacement heffers down there. Then he makes hay and plants corn. Of course, he owns another farm- the farm where he lives. I farmed it myself for I suppose a couple of years and I found out that it was just too much work for me to really... then more or less I began to do part-time.

CL: So, you were doing it full-time for a while?

LS: Well, I always had this business but I'd go down in the evenings and for a couple of years between a neighbor helping me why we got crops out. So then I'd begin to do more or less the raising of the chickens and the beef cattle and we always fooled with horses, saddle horses. And our daughter was always in 4-H for several years and she showed the horses. So that was what that amounted to.

CL: Were you involved in the garbage business, as well, like your father?

LS: Yup.

CL: So, was that another reason you got into the farming so you could feed the garbage to off to the pigs?

LS: Well, yes, that's basically yes, you could say that?

CL: Was it typical for farmers to be kind of part-time farmers, have one day job and then also own the farm?

LS: Yeah, it's still pretty much that way unless a person is a big grain farmer or dairy farmer or a specialty farmer- that could be orchards or some farmer's aide. There's tree farms, you know Christmas tree farms, and some of them are vegetable farmers. They run a farmer market. It's just a way of life with some people.

CL: Was it typical for these people who worked on the farm part-time to live off the farm, somewhere in town here?

LS: Really, I would say that a lot of people like rural living. They like to live in the country but that can't make enough off of the farm so they have to take a factory job to supplement their income and a lot of farms the woman works some place and a man works in a factory and then they farm too.

CL: And they live in town?

LS: They live on the farm. They like rural living. Some people wouldn't live in town for anything because they love the outdoors and the wide open spaces.

CL: Did you ever consider moving to the farm?

LS: Well, not exactly, because with the business that you had in town it was much better to do it this way. Of course, we have a house on there and we use that for a summer home, you'd call it. But we really never used it like a lot of people would use their summer home because they'd go out in the spring and stay until cold weather drove them back to town. But it's been enjoyable. I've done a lot of work down there and I've enjoyed it but I don't think I'd want to do it again.

CL: It's been a lot of hard work? What have you enjoyed about it, about the farm?

LS: Well, I've always enjoyed livestock. And I enjoyed the pond, having your own recreation place, I guess. I guess that's it. You just enjoy seeing something that you own and you think you can look and see the things that you did- the trees that you planted. I suppose I planted two or three thousand trees down there- pine trees and oh all kinds of trees around the pond. Bald cyprus trees and oak trees.

CL: It's worthwhile to see them grow and that kind of thing? To switch gears a little bit, can we just talk about your family history in Knox County? Do you know how long your family has been in Knox County?

LS: Well, as near as I can figure, my dad was born and raised in Belmont County- Barnsville is the name of the town.

CL: Where is Barnsville?

LS: It's down on Wheeling... on the West Virginia/Ohio line. Wheeling is just over the line in West Virginia. And he rode horseback from Barnsville up to Mount Vernon. I had a picture of him on the horse that he rode on. When he first came here I think he was a waiter in a restaurant. One of the neighbors that was an attorney and he told me that he met my dad when he used to eat at this restaurant. And then so he later worked at a state institution, a state sanitorium, where they... tyburculosis (?) was rampant back then in the early part of the century- a lot of people died from tyburculosis. And they felt that the outdoors, that these patients... they kept them out doors as much as they could because they felt that that was good for tyburculosis. Now, the place is the Mount Vernon Development Center- it's for retarded people now. You know where it is, don't you?

CL: I don't know if I do. Where is it in relation to....?

LS: Well, you know where Hart's store is. If you would go straight back from Hart's store about half a mile, you would run into this big spread. It covers a lot of territory. I don't know how many people they got working there but... it's for people that are retarded, that's what it is. People who are handicaped, they can't take care of themselves, they have to take care of them just like babies. They have no control. It's kind of a pitiful situation.

CL: Why did your father decide to move here in the first place?

LS: Really, I never heard him say why. I suppose there were some people from, relatives of ours, who came up from Barnsville. So, maybe one person came and then he seemed to be some opportunities up here and things are so much different in my time and that I can remember but back in his time at the turn of the century jobs were just... there were too many people for the jobs.

CL: So, he was looking for a job. What did he do originally? Was he working as a waiter?

LS: I guess, as I understand it. And he, evidently, he was born and raised on a farm in Belmont County. He always said, 'there's nothing like a farm.'

CL: Did he come up here by himself or did his parents come as well?

LS: No, his parents didn't come. He came up here and he got married and I think he told me that his wife lived 10 years until she passed away. Then he married my mother and I was the oldest child. I got 2 sisters. Then my mother had a daughter when they got married and so I have a step-sister and then I got 2 full sisters and one of them has since passed away. My youngest sister she was an MD.

CL: Do you know how soon after your father came to Mount Vernon he became a farmer?

LS: Well, I think he was always a farmer. It was one of these things where there was- the reason I call it a backyard farmer- there was a lot of vacant lots around town and they'd tell him that you

can have this lot which you raise off of. And so he put a crop on it or put a garden in, he did a lot of truck gardening too. It kept the grass down. Of course, he always had a team of horses and of course he could take care of it by plowing with the horses.

IS: Pardon me, but in late October he was selling green beans and corn and vegetables around here that nobody else had- cabbage, pumpkins. He didn't charge very much for them.

LS: We never had a whole lot of cows- we'd always have at least 2 cows because the neighbors who were our customers depended on the milk. When one cow was dry why you'd have to have another who was giving milk. So, we never had more than 2 or 3 cows. Of course they had to be milked twice a day- you had to do it by hand.

CL: Did a lot of people in that time own farms around here, do you think, or like your father did they own a piece of land?

LS: Back in those days, yes, there were a lot of places where these new homes, where these homes are, not new homes but a lot of the older homes and land was sold to developers or people bought a piece of ground and you know build a house on it. In our time... of course the place across the street here, this Roundhill Farm, that's been there since 1805. When I was growing up they had a couple boys that were my age and we used to play ball up there and there was a pond up there- we used to ice skate. They always had a dairy herd and one thing that's interesting they had a couple that used to milk the cows up there. They used to wear wooden shoes. I suppose back in those days rubber boots weren't too popular- they put on these wooden shoes with thick soles.

CL: So, have you always felt a connection with other farmers?

LS: Oh, yes.

CL: Do you think there is some kind of a community?

LS: It's just like anything else, I guess. If you're interested in... that's where you form friendships, some people that are interested in the same thing that you are interested in. Yes, I think that's natural for anybody to form a friendship. You're different organizations- I've never been real deeply in the different farm organizations. Through the conservation department and just on neighbor brings a friend around and that's just seems to be the way it works. Yes, I know several farmers.

CL: I just wanted to briefly mention that one of the sections we're doing for our project is ethnic variation in farming. And I don't know if there are that many African- American farms or farmers in Knox County- I kind of doubt it...?

LS: I don't think there are too many. I know of another one but I think they might be in Delaware County. But I just don't know because I don't see... I always go to the fair and we always have a tractor show and I don't see any Afro-American farmers there.

CL: So, that's kind of an indication that there isn't that large of a black farming community here?

LS: I don't think there is.

CL: I've heard that although there is a very small black community in Mount Vernon and Knox County...

IS: Apple Valley!

CL: Oh really. I've heard that this small number is pretty strong here- is that your understanding or no?

IS: No, no, no. They've got an AME church, a Baptist church and an Apostelic and all of them there's white people go as well as the colored people. If they have 20 people there they'd be doing good. The one's at the AME church don't have very many and they cut their services short and go around to the corner to the Baptist church on Mulberry Street. This Apostelic church, on W. High Street, they have a colored minister and his wife, but then they had an assistant man that's white. And they have a large group but I don't know nothing about that.

CL: So, from what I'm gathering, there's not all that much of a African-American community in Knox County? With your experience in farming, have you sensed any black farming community at all or is pretty much just inter-racial.

LS: I work well with white people very well. I am not a person, I don't know why, but I'm not a person that holds grudges. Everybody I'm sure has had some an unpleasant experience sometime regardless what race. I've worked very well... I feel as though I wouldn't want to live any place else. I say the community has been good to me. I've got friends from the well educated all the way down to the uneducated I'm sure. I think that's the reason I've gotten along as well as I have. I might sound like I'm blowing my own horn but I'm satisfied with what I have done and it hasn't been always easy but the community has been good to me and I don't care what anybody says you can't do it on your own. It takes customers and it takes people and word of mouth and that's what makes things nice for you.

CL: How did you decide to stay in this area?

LS: Well, when I came out of school- that was in '34- and there was nothing to do you couldn't buy a job then. There were men that were supporting families and only making a dollar or a dollar and a half a day. And you wondered how people existed. Of course, back there in those days you lived on what you had. And of course they have always had comodities. I can remember when commodity day came you would see people with wheelbarrows, wagons, coster wagon, anything, going to city hall to get their ration of beans or cornmeal, maybe some canned meat. I think that one thing that was good for us, we knew so many people that were influential and I know my sisters they always worked for different white people that were influential. We would come home from school and my mother would have a note written that Mrs. So-and-So wants you to come as soon as you get out of school. They always did work, made their own

money. I was never broke- it always seemed like someone always wanted me to do something. I've always been comfortable.

CL: Why did your sisters leave and you stay?

LS: My mother was always interested in nursing. Now the church had- she was a Seventh Day Adventist and the Adventists were great on health. Of course, my mother she took this course on home nursing and she had 2 or 3 text books and she used to study them. I suppose that my youngest sister, that probably rubbed off on her. She got her education on here own because we never had anything. We weren't poor we just didn't have any money. My mother paid for her to go to college and then she enlisted in the Army. The Army paid for her education. She came out a first luitenant. Then she went on and she kept on working and now she is a doctor. She was with the Kaiser Foundation.

CL: How did you two meet?

LS: She lived in Marion and I lived in Mount Vernon and I don't know. The first time I ever saw you my cousin had been up here and they'd met you. So, then we went up and I don't know...

IS: He's not telling the truth. He had 3 of my girlfriends that he dated before he came to me.

LS: You just with a bunch of kids- I was't serious about any of them. That's just how it worked out. Why it worked out that way I don't know.

IS: 56 years... If he know now what he should have known then it would have never even happened.

CL: How many children do you have?

IS: Just one... we lost one. I wanted to have more children but just wasn't able to have any more. But I adopted all the other people's children.

CL: I'm sure you did. I know you metioned before that one of the reasons you stayed here was because there was work here. Was there anything else that made you stay in this area?

LS: Well, I guess...

IS: His father was very popular around Mount Vernon, with the hayrides and one thing or another. His mother was a very close with the Adventist church and his grandfather was an AME preacher. She left the church and went to the Adventist church and then his fahter stayed with the AME church but he was in everything, always something with children. He loved kids and he would always ride the kids on his wagon.

CL: Do you think one of the reasons you stayed in this area was because of the rural lifestyle? Did that kind of keep you here?

LS: Yes. I think so. I like farm life. Like I say, I wasn't really as deeply involved as some farmers have been. When I was younger I used to do a whole lot more. As years went on, then I had a hip operation. So that kind of took away a whole lot. I had different farmers that helped me and you can do a lot then. When you was working you can still do a lot. A lot of farmers you used to tell me the thing that kept them happy about farming, everytime they came to town they had something to bring to town to sell. When they retired well they didn't have anything to sell and everytime they came to town it cost them money. The bottoms line, that's the bottom line. A lot of people talk about that you're a money grabber or you're tight or cheap but the bottom line is what counts. If there isn't anything in the bottom line that's it. You worked hard but still when you'd go to bed and you'd get up the next morning you were ready to go again. A lot of times the days were pretty long, especially during harvest time, but I could depend on neighbors to help me.

CL: Have you seen this community change since you've been here and in particular, the farming community? How have they both changed?

LS: Well, the farms have gotten bigger and a lot of the farmers have sold out. Here's a thing that is happening today- I don't like to see it but there is so many farms that are being sold for housing development. Maybe I'm old-fashioned. You can't blame a farmer because he can get more out of it for development. Then of course another thing that helps out on your taxes, this CAV, that's one thing it keeps your taxes at a reasonable rate. You belong to this CAV and every year they send you a notice that you have to fill out this form and as long as you've got it in agriculture well you don't have to pay that high tax. It's not for everybody because wouldn't like it at all.

CL: How have you seen the community change?

IS: There's more stores, we got a shopping center, we've got Apple Valley. I think it's changed for progress and that it's a good thing. Still, there's this other thing. There are these people who are trying to get our water to take to Delaware. That's something that I don't think is right. Although I don't think we should be selfish with it. There's a lot of industry. Honda is coming in between Fredricktown and Marrow County. 3 farmers sold their land there but I think these people were old and retired and they probably couldn't do nothing with it any how. A lot of farmers children don't want to do it now because...

LS: They would like to. There's a lot of them that would like to but my goodness you can't get in and the prices... of course when it looks like when you go to the store and you buy meat or you buy a farm product that have grain- look what a box of cereal costs. A farmer gets just a few cents out of a 4 or 5 dollar box of cereal. That's a discouraging part about it. It used to be when I came along, farmers used to tell me you will always have something to eat, you can always raise something to eat on a farm. And that's the bottom line. Of course, we used to buy our hogs at the producer's livestock. They used to see them out there and they would be giving you advice and the advice they gave you was good advice. How many years ago has that been? 40 years ago?

CL: How do you feel about this changing? How do you feel about the development?

IS: I'm not against it. Are you Lawrence? After all, we've had our day and these young people have to have something to do. I'm for the young people- you know I was young a long, long time ago.

CL: Do you think it takes away from the rural character of this area and if it does is that a bad thing?

LS: Well, I don't know. That would be hard to say with any degree of certainty because the people have to have some place to live. The traffic out there is terrible at times. To try and get in and out of a restaurant or a place that's like that it just seems like you're talking your life in your hands almost. But they say it wasn't proper planning, it wasn't considered. Well, 25 or 30 years ago who would have ever thought there would ever be a lot of those places out there where the shopping center is. Like I was saying, my dad was a backyard farmer and of course a lot of the times I knew places where he farmed the farmer had died and the widow still owned the land and she would make a deal with dad to use the land. It's strange to think what they do out there to the land and cutting the hills down like they do out there.