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U.19 Long Civil Rights Movement: Breaking New Ground

Interview U-0655
Henry Anderson
23 June 2011

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Abstract – Henry Anderson

Interviewee: Henry Anderson

Interviewer: Robert Hunt Ferguson

Interview Date: June 23, 2011

Location: Anderson Farm & Feed Supply, Lexington, Mississippi

Interview Length: 0:32:48

Overall, this interview discussed Mr. Anderson's transition from a row crop farmer to a cattle farmer. He discussed how difficult it was for farmers in the "hill country" (Lexington, Mississippi is about 15 miles east of the Delta and is literally hilly). Anderson felt that he was denied loans for farming equipment and land because the government was trying to put hill country farmers out of business in favor of delta farmers. He was also a plaintiff in the Pigford case and receive a settlement, though he agreed that the payment was a drop in the bucket compared to what they had lost over the years. He said that he had been discriminated against by the USDA and that his father had as well. His father had been directed by the USDA to go to a bank for a loan, but the bank refused. He also said that he and his father often ran afoul of the white gin owners who were not fair in their dealings with black cotton farmers. Anderson said the discrimination was one big reason his father quit farming in the early 1970s and why he (Henry Anderson) turned to cattle farming.

Field Notes – Henry Anderson

Interviewee: Henry Anderson

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THE INTERVIEWEE: Mr. Henry Anderson was born in 1955 and owned over 100 acres that had been in his family since the 1800s, though he couldn't quite remember the exact history of the land. He purchased the land from his uncle in the 1970s and began farming in his early 20s. The first several years he farmed row crops – mainly corn and cotton, then moved into cattle and horses. Mr. Anderson has lived in Lexington, Mississippi his whole life.

THE INTERVIEWER: Robert Hunt Ferguson is a PhD Candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ferguson is white, male, native North Carolinian, aged 32 in the summer of 2011. His research focuses on race relations and labor in the rural Jim Crow South.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview took place at Anderson Farm & Feed Supply in Lexington, Mississippi. The interview was not planned in advance. I walked into the feed store hoping to make contacts for interviews, met Mr. Henry Anderson in the store and he agreed to be interviewed with the first minute of our meeting. I brought the recorder in and we sat in the feed store. As a result of the quick nature of our introduction and not wanting to turn down an interview, the quality is not the best. The loading door of the feed store was open and the occasional automobile motored by and a few customers wondered in and out of the store. Because he was there doing business, the interview did not last long – about half an hour. Henry Anderson owns the feed store where the interview took place. His son, Henry Jr., was with him and I suggested that Henry Jr. may want to be involved in the interviews for Breaking New Ground next year. He is the prime candidate – rising senior at an HBCU (Alcorn State), studying Agricultural Economics, is from the area and knows lots of black farmers. After graduation, Henry Jr. hopes to move back to Lexington to help his father improve the farm financially. Henry Sr. remarked to me as I was packing up that he wished more people, black and white, could set aside their differences and help each other. He was specifically referring to those big business (like corporate farms) who only cared about a profit and put the little farmer out of business, but he seemed to hold an interracial ethic invested in cooperation. Two themes jumped out at me in this interview and the interview on 6.21/2011 with Charlie and Larry King – both Henry Anderson and Larry King had expressed the feeling that they had been discriminated against by the USDA and local officials. Anderson, however, said that white owners of the cotton gin had cheated he and his father. The second theme I observed was an ecological ethic

that each man expressed. They talked about how much they loved the land and wouldn't want to live anywhere else and that "farming is in our blood" – that's the exact phrase that both used.

Interviewee: Henry Anderson
Interview Date: June 23, 2011
Location: Lexington, Mississippi
Interviewer: Rob Ferguson
Length: 1 disc, approximately 33 minutes

START OF DISC

RF: My name is Rob Ferguson. It's June twenty-third, 2011. And if you would introduce yourself.

HA: My name is Henry Anderson.

RF: And when and where you were born.

HA: I was born here in Holmes County, Lexington, Mississippi.

RF: Okay. What year?

HA: 9-10-55.

RF: '55, okay. So have you been in Holmes County your whole life?

HA: Yes.

RF: Okay. And how long have you been farming?

HA: Well, I row crop farmed for probably five years and then I stopped row cropping and then just started raising cow and horses.

RF: So you own your own farm?

HA: Yes.

RF: Okay. About how many acres is that?

HA: Well, I own about a hundred and fifty. Well, I own about a hundred and seventy-five, eighty acres and I rent probably, oh just right off the top of my head, probably three, four hundred.

RF: Wow, okay. So you rent three hundred for yourself or you rent it out to other people?

HA: No, I rent it for myself.

RF: For yourself, right. And that's all cattle now?

HA: Huh?

RF: That's all cattle now?

HA: No, well, it's cattle and some is hay ground, hay land.

RF: Right. And when you were row cropping, what you were growing then?

HA: I grewed beans and also cotton.

RF: Okay. What year did you start farming?

HA: I started farming probably about '76, '77, 1976 and 1977.

RF: Okay. So in your early twenties, I guess.

HA: Yeah.

RF: Okay. Had that been family-owned farm before you got into it?

HA: Yes.

RF: Okay. And how far back in your family had that land gone?

HA: A long ways. The land that I was originally farming was my uncle's land and, ooh, it's been in the family way back.

RF: Okay. Turn of the century or even before, the 1800s? How far are we talking?

HA: Probably back around, yeah, maybe late 1800s.

RF: Wow, okay.

HA: So it was something around there.

RF: And so your uncle owned the land before you.

HA: Yeah.

RF: And you bought it from him?

HA: Right.

RF: Wow. I guess it had come down to him from his grandparents or his parents.

HA: Yeah, some from his parents and then I think he also bought.

RF: Okay. So when you switched over from row cropping to cattle, why did you make that choice? What caused that decision?

HA: Well, it was difficult getting the money to farm with as far as row cropping and all that type of situation. And also people, they was trying to get, I think they was trying to get a lot of the hill people to stop farming and push it more down to the delta area. That's my theory. So it was hard to get money for to farm in hill land. So I just stopped it and started raising cows and horses.

RF: Right. Did you approach USDA for a loan?

HA: Yeah.

RF: Okay. And it didn't work out.

HA: No, they didn't want to, yeah.

RF: Okay. I interviewed a gentleman yesterday in Yazoo City. He was part of the Pigford Settlement.

HA: Okay.

RF: Did you enter into that as well?

HA: Yeah.

RF: You did?

HA: Yeah.

RF: Okay, and did that work out for you and your family?

HA: Yeah, I done well.

RF: That's good. They were also part of the settlement, but he said in the end it was sort of just a drop in the bucket compared to what they lost.

HA: Well, that's exactly right. It were. It were.

RF: So you said it was your opinion that they were trying to push farming into the delta.

HA: Yeah, yeah. They were basically trying to get rid of all the—my opinion, that's from way out seeing they was trying to, especially cotton and soybean. It was more like, I don't know, to me it kind of seemed like they were saying it was easier to raise those type crops in a delta area versus hill land, I guess maybe even because of irrigation and all that type of stuff. And hill land, you know, it's not too good as far as irrigation. That's kind of my theory.

RF: Yeah. Did you come through the cattle through Heifer International or how did you acquire the cattle?

HA: No, actually I just kind of took the little money that I was basically trying to farm with and just started my own cattle operation.

RF: Okay. Do you have siblings that farm as well?

HA: No.

RF: No, okay. You're the only one.

HA: Yeah, I'm the only one out of ten.

RF: Oh wow, really? Okay. Do most of them still live in the area?

HA: No, only me and I have one sister that stayed here in Holmes County and everybody else stays either out of the county or out of the state.

RF: Okay. Let's see. In your community, I guess, in the area where you farm, are there lots of other farmers in the area and are they mostly African American? Are they mostly white? How does it break down?

HA: Well, we've got in the area, you mean right in the area where I live in the community, is that what--?

RF: Yeah.

HA: Yeah. It's mostly just black in that area, only one black row crop farmer in that area, but there's several cattle farmers in the area.

RF: Okay. So like you are doing, mostly people are doing cattle.

HA: Yeah.

RF: There's only one row crop, okay. One of the things we're interested in is trying to get an idea of what the community was like. Well, are you a member of a cooperative?

HA: No.

RF: No, okay. And in the community, do neighbors sort of help each other out if someone gets sick? Well, I guess it's a little different without row cropping, can you call on your neighbors to have them help you out?

HA: Oh yeah.

RF: Yeah.

HA: It's a pretty tight-knitted community.

RF: Okay.

HA: Willing to help.

RF: Okay. Do y'all participate in things like barn raisings or like that kind of community thing, or is it just more informal like you know that you can call on your neighbor to help you out?

HA: Yeah.

RF: That kind of thing.

HA: Yeah, that's more like it. Neighbors just, if someone fall in need, you know you can call on them for help.

RF: Okay. And about how many farmers are we talking about in the area you were just talking about, the cattle farmers and the one row crop?

HA: In that area, probably maybe fifteen, twelve or fifteen.

RF: Okay. That's a good size.

HA: Some of them are real small. Some have goats. Some got hogs, some stuff like that.

RF: Okay, but you focus mainly on cattle and horses.

HA: Right.

RF: Is that what you said?

HA: Yeah.

RF: How many head of cattle do you have?

HA: Well, right now I'm running about twenty-two head now.

RF: Okay.

HA: I had to sell down my cattle operation because when I was working, I was partly working, I really didn't have time to see after like, shoot, I was running about close to a hundred head and my pastures weren't in shape and then I didn't have time to get it like it really ought to be. And so I sold down some head back two, three, a couple of years ago. It was about a little

better than a year ago and just to try to get my operation like it ought to be. But now I'm kind of, well, I'm out of a job. So I've got plenty of time to put my time into the farm as far as replacing fences and stuff like that and trying to get my land in shape to support the amount of cows that I've got in my head.

RF: Right. Okay, so you're running about twentysome now. Is that a little less or about the same as most other of your neighbors are running cattle?

HA: It's maybe a little less than one or two, but it's more than most running cows, running about twentysome head of cows and then we've got about twentysome head of horses.

RF: Wow.

HA: Yeah, we raise horses. At one point, we were raising them to sell, we were training them and selling them, but now selling is not doing too good.

RF: Okay, like show horses, like selling them for shows?

HA: Well, for roping and riding.

RF: Yeah, for ranches, sure. And so you said you had to have another job, I guess to supplement income from farming.

HA: Well, I had another job, but the company sold out. That happened this year.

RF: Okay.

HA: So that give me plenty of time to devote all of my energy into the farm. So that's basically what I'm focusing on right now.

RF: Okay. And do you have people helping you out, family members helping you out currently on the farm?

HA: Well, my younger son, he's in college and he helps me when he can.

RF: Is that who I just met?

HA: Yeah.

RF: Okay.

HA: My older son were helping. Matter of fact, he were trying to get into this as deep as he could, but he's got health issues right now. So it's preventing him from doing what he can do. Matter of fact, he may end up, it looks like his health might even stop him from working. He has some health problems.

RF: I'm sorry to hear that. It's not good.

HA: We're going to make it the only way I know.

RF: Sure, okay. So when you were coming up, you said you start farming around when you were twenty, but did you grow up on a farm also?

HA: I did.

RF: Okay.

HA: I grew up on a farm. My dad farmed. He farmed about sixty, he started out with about sixty, seventy acres of cotton and maybe fifteen, twenty acres of corn. There were about four of us that were big enough to work in the field. That was back in them old folks didn't believe in (13:29) and all that type of stuff. They believed in the hoe or the file, chopping and hoeing. Get out and chop the cotton and keep it clean.

RF: It's hard work.

HA: It was work.

RF: From what I understand.

HA: Yeah, it were.

RF: Yeah. Did your father own that land or did he rent it?

HA: He owned some and rented some.

RF: Rented some, okay. And so you did that from a young age?

HA: I did, I did. I did that from five years old on up.

RF: Okay. Did you come to hate chopping season?

HA: I did, I did. I come to hate farming, period. I really said to myself that I would never farm, but you know, when I come to the point, I don't know, I guess it's just in my blood, but I come to the point to where I got older. Well, he got out of farming and then that was about probably when I was maybe tenth grade or so. And then when I got out of it a few years, then it kind of eased back in my blood. And too, I guess, I looked at it like the older people wanted to use the hoe and the file, and I basically was kind of leaning to chemicals and stuff of that nature, trying to call myself. You know how a young guy is, farm smarts, but I didn't really know what I was doing. (laughs) But I was doing what I thought I knew.

RF: Right. And all your brothers and sisters, I guess, were out there too.

HA: No, well, they were when they were at home, but when my dad stopped, then that stopped it all for them.

RF: Oh, so when you were in tenth grade, it wasn't that you stopped. It was that he stopped farming.

HA: He stopped farming.

RF: Oh, I see, okay. And what caused him to quit farming?

HA: Well, basically he just, about like what I just told you back, those guys, they was having a hard time farming and plus having a hard time trying to get ahold to money to farm and there were just things as the years progressed, then it was just, it seemed to me that the bigger farmer was pushing the smaller farmer out.

RF: Right.

HA: It finally came to a point to where one year the price of cotton went up and all the new and little tractor farmers, they said, “Well, this is time for me. I might make a dollar or two this year. So I’m going to make, get what I can get, and get out of it.” So that’s basically what happened.

RF: Okay. So what did you do those few years that you weren’t farming until you got back into it?

HA: Well, for a year or so there, I just chased a few women. (laughs)

RF: That’s about the right age, I guess.

HA: Yeah, until I kind of come to my common sense. I figured that I need to—jobs and things, there were jobs around, but the pay wasn’t very good. When I got out of school, I started on a job and I learned a little from my dad as far as farming and all, and I just figured, well, the land wasn’t doing anything and that would give me an opportunity to make a few extra dollars. The work was slow. You worked a few days and you were off a few days. So I figured, well, that would give me an opportunity to make a dollar or two on the side.

RF: Right, okay.

HA: That’s the reason why I started back.

RF: Okay. Let’s see. What else can I ask you about farming? Well, you said that your generation was into farming smart. Did you—

HA: Well, that’s what I thought.

RF: Well, right. Did you make an attempt to purchase a nice tractor and all of the new mechanization that was going on?

HA: Well, all that was in my head, but it wasn’t in my pocket.

RF: Yeah, I understand, right.

HA: I couldn't do it. That was something that I wanted to do. At one time, I figured, I thought I could make a pretty good go at it, but it just got like, it seemed like to me that at that time, the setting for certain farmers, it just wasn't too feasible and it seemed like things were changing around to where small farmers just couldn't cut it, especially hill farmers.

RF: Right, okay. A lot of folks you knew who were farming in the 60s and 70s, they got pushed out as well?

HA: Right.

RF: By, you think, bigger farms?

HA: Yeah.

RF: And do you think a lot of them tried to get loans and were turned down as well?

HA: Yeah.

RF: Was your father, did he fall into that boat of trying to get a loan?

HA: Well, at the time that he—my dad always had been pretty independent and he was the type of guy that he ran his own business. What I'm saying is he ran his own household and he didn't want his children to know anything about his business. So that just the way those old heads were. So I really didn't know how he was, I mean, totally how he was planning all this type of thing, but I do know that he, just from a few words with him, I knew that he was trying to go through (20:25) with a bunch of some stuff and he was having a problem to do it. Matter of fact, I think I've heard him talk one time about him going to the administration to try and get money and they sent him to a bank, and then the bank turned him down. It seemed like from what I gather, he seemed like they was just giving him the run around on trying to get some type of monies to farm. So he just basically got out of it because it wasn't doing much good. We had a couple of old tractors and then breakdowns and those types of things. Then we were trying to

rent cotton pickers alone at cotton picking time, and then the money runs short and then you try and get hired hands to try and pick cotton, the money running short, and then you've got to try and get your cotton to the gin and all that type, just running into brick walls here and there. And it just finally, they just decided that he would throw in the towel.

RF: Sure, okay. You mentioned when you got back into farming in the 70s, it was partly economic or you thought it could.

HA: Yeah.

RF: Working four days and then supplemental income.

HA: Right.

RF: Since then and over the years, what has farming sort of meant to you and your family? Sort of, I guess it's a legacy type question. What has it done for your family?

HA: Well, to be honest with you, I don't know. It's just in my blood, I guess. I kind of have a love for the land. I love animals. I love wildlife. In my mind, I have a lot of ideas as far as farming and as far as ranching and as far as all this type of thing. I would like to get back into at least growing my own corn. I would also like to and I'm working on trying to get, through the Soil Conservation, I'm getting some help from them now and trying to get my land developed back to where I could at least get back to, well, my goal is to try and reach at least two hundred head of—

RF: Cattle.

HA: Cattle. That's (23:45) cattle. And that's my goal, but I don't know if I can reach it, but I'm definitely going to try. Right now I just love animals and love the land, and I'm trying to get back to where, in my mind, I've kind of deviated off from and get back to the goal that I was trying to reach from the start.

RF: Okay. Eighty percent of your siblings moved outside.

HA: Yeah.

RF: Is that one reason why you stayed, just because you liked the land?

HA: Right.

RF: Yeah, okay.

HA: Yeah. See most of them moved to big cities and things of that nature, and I like to be out in the open where I can go lay up on the tree and won't nobody bother me.

RF: I'm with you. Did a lot of your siblings move to the north?

HA: Well, they're in different parts, some in the north, some east, west.

RF: Okay.

HA: Some out in Arizona, some in Illinois, some in Texas, some in Jackson, and some in South Carolina (24:59).

RF: The ones who are out of state, do they still come back and visit?

HA: Oh yeah.

RF: Okay. Is there anything else you want to say about farming or your life or anything I didn't ask?

HA: (laughs) Well, like I say, the black farmers had to go through this ordeal as far as trying to get recognized and treated fairly. It's something that I wish that it wouldn't have never had to happen and I hope that it never has to happen again. I'm a firm believer that we all are human beings and we should be able to live and work together and for everybody's benefit. And I think if every man is treated fairly and allowed the opportunity to incorporate his ideas and his feeling into things that he have in his mind and his head he know could be a great benefit to a big

part of the world. I just think if everybody is treated fairly and allowed the opportunity to do such things, I think it would just be a benefit to the world.

RF: That's the sentiment this project is, in some ways, about. I'm glad to hear you say that. You know, actually talking about the, I guess, discrimination you faced from the USDA, did you face any other kind of discrimination from local farmers? You said your dad, I guess, faced it from a local bank.

HA: Yeah.

RF: Was the discrimination you felt, was it mainly from the government or was it from local people as well?

HA: Well, now as far as my dad is concerned, I didn't feel the crunch too much from local people because really I didn't deal with them as much as he did, but now even in carrying their products to different places like your gin and your seed bin and places of that nature, they didn't the full cooperation that they should have.

RF: From the gin owners?

HA: Gin owners and places like that. I really think they was taken advantage of, and then they felt like, "Well, I don't have no other choice," which at some point, they didn't, really didn't because—and like I say, when you're pulling together, it benefits everybody and back then, black people just really didn't have enough money and a lot of them were afraid to speak their mind because of the situation in which they was in. But I mentioned several times, which I guess I was too young to realize that they didn't have the resources nor the technology to do what I was speaking about doing. I said, "Well, if you're having problems, y'all get together and put you up a gin or so to speak." I'm talking, but I'm not realizing what all it takes and what it had to go through to do such a thing. But yeah, they ran into many obstacles and some hurdles that they

felt like they just couldn't, just couldn't jump over, and that just brought them to the quitting point.

RF: Right. I remembered actually one question about your cattle. Are you in the business of slaughtering them yourself or do you send them somewhere else to be--?

HA: No, we basically run, carry them to the sow barn, sell them, yeah.

RF: Okay. Where is the sow barn in this area?

HA: Now back when I was really doing, when I was doing pretty good, we had one here in Lexington and then that one closed out and so I started selling to Canton and Kosciusko and Winona. When I was doing pretty good, I had tried to make my mind up and trying to get set up to where I could sell on the internet or some nature. Like I sat around the house and most all of my kids are computer smart, which I'm not, and they pull up things on the computer and also started me on watching sell cows on the internet, and all this type of thing. And I said, "Well, if we get up, I can get myself set up in such a way to where I have enough to just sell like these guys sell." But my back pocket wasn't deep enough.

RF: Yeah.

HA: So we didn't do it. And plus like I say, at the time, my job started requiring most all of my time and I just didn't have the time to do what I really wanted to do.

RF: Yeah. Well, I hope you can get the herd back up to where you want it.

HA: It's in my mind and I figure if I kind of work smart and cut corners and penny pinch here and there, I might could take it from my mind and put it on the land.

RF: Yeah, okay. Well, I don't think I have any other questions at the moment.

HA: Okay.

RF: But I thank you very much.

HA: Alright.

RF: For talking to me.

HA: Alright.

RF: And well, I'll cut it off, but thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. April 2012