Interview with Jim Burrus

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Interviewer: Charlyn Fargo

with Robert Warren and Mike Maniscalco

Fargo: My name's Charlyn Fargo, and it's a beautiful, sunny day, May seventeenth, about 10:45 in the morning. I'm here interviewing Jim Burrus, a farmer from Jacksonville for the *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture* project. Jim, we're just so glad to be talking to you. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born, where you were raised—how you got to be in Jacksonville?

Burrus: Well, I was born right here in this house—or not in this house, but in Jacksonville, at Passavant Hospital—in 1950. My grandfather bought this place in 1946, and so I've been here all my life with the exception of about ten years. I worked at Kroger's and went to Lincoln Land Community College.

Fargo: So this is really the family farmstead, but you've made a lot of changes in this.

Burrus: Yeah, we have. Two years ago, we remodeled the house and built onto it.

Fargo: So the bedroom that you grew up in isn't necessarily the bedroom that you're in now, but what you've done is really beautiful, to preserve that farmstead and that heritage, I'm sure. Tell us a little bit about your operation.

Burrus: We raise grass-fed beef—grass-finished beef. We're 100 percent grass-fed, we're certified organic, and we raise pastured poultry. Our crops are conventional. We have corn and beans, and then also we raise alfalfa.

Fargo: You know, your dad or your grandpa—when they started—they didn't even know the term "grass-fed." Help me out with that. What made you turn that way, turn that direction? What made you think about, I need to go from conventional to grass-fed?

Burrus: Well, actually our grandfathers and our great-grandfathers did, because that's the way cattle ate then. It was actually after World War II that they started feeding

grain to cattle. So it's new in a sense, maybe, to our generation, but not in the past.

Fargo: A lot of people would say, "Well, what's wrong with feeding a steer grain?"

Burrus: Well, what's wrong with it? You know, you can kill cattle with grain.

Fargo: By giving them too much?

Burrus: By giving them too much. They have five stomachs. They were built to consume grass and produce meat out of forage, and that's what we went back to doing.

Fargo: You had to kind of make some major changes in your operation in order to do that, didn't you? Tell us a little bit about that.

Burrus: Well, we first started with a management-intensive grazing system on our pasture in 1995.We sold our calves off the cows in November or December, and now we keep our calves through yearlings and through two years of age.

Fargo: So you keep them a lot longer than the traditional or the conventional way of doing it.

Burrus: Yeah, so actually, we have three herds. We have a cow-calf herd, we have the yearling herd, and we have the finishing herd.

Fargo: In those three herds, how many cattle do you have on your property at any one time?

Burrus: Well, at any one time, like 150.

Fargo: Wow, so you have a lot of animals to take care of. And then how about your chickens? How many of those do you have?

Burrus: Well, we raise 200 in a batch.

Fargo: Do you have 200 chickens now, in May?

Burrus: We have 200 now.

Fargo: How do you market your meat then, from the chickens or the steers?

Burrus: Well, a lot of it has been through our beef customers. We started out with our grass-finished beef, and they asked if we had chickens. We also advertise some on the Internet.

Fargo: That's something your grandpa would never have done, is advertise it. And do you get a lot of people, so then you pack it in dry ice and ship it out to them, or do they come to the farm, or how does that work?

Burrus: We do both. We ship: we pack it in dry ice and we ship. Most of it is picked up at the processor. Some people do come to the farm and buy meat here.

Fargo: There's kind of a whole trend that people love to know where that meat came from and who raised it, and so do you get a lot of questions from people about how this whole thing is done? You know, interested, before they want to put that in their mouths, to know where it came from?

Burrus: Yeah, they are interested. There's a thing now that they call the 100-Mile Diet, so they're trying to eat all their food within a 100-mile radius, so they are interested in where it comes from, and what it eats.

Fargo: Tell me, in making this change—I'm sure it's been a huge change, a change in your mindset and the whole thing—because you don't raise your animals, you don't farm the way your dad necessarily farmed, right?

Burrus: That's right.

Fargo: Yeah, so this is a change in mindset. And I don't care, at our age, Jim, change is hard, right? So how did you get over that hump to say, Yeah, I'm really going to do this, and I'm going to think about it differently?

Burrus: How I got over the hump I guess was, you know, we had this rough ground, and it was pasture ground. Dad saidknow, as long as he was around, it's going to stay that way. There was a lot of hills that were just being farmed and pasture turned into grain. I had to figure out a way to make it more profitable and so, through management-intensive grazing and also through retailing our product, we were able to make that profitable.

Fargo: Did you read some books on it or were there some other farmers that helped you?

Burrus: Actually, I met a person named Jim Garish in Illinois one day. He worked for the Department of Agriculture in Missouri—or actually, it was the University of Missouri—and he was kind of the person that got me interested in grazing.

Fargo: You heard him speak?

Burrus: I heard him speak. It was east of Peoria. He said, "If you want to learn more, come to our grazing school in Linneus, Missouri." So I signed up for the grazing school in Linneus, Missouri, then I followed him and his group, called the Green Hills Farm Project, and we went to the farms, and learned from other farmers how they were doing things.

Fargo: How old were you at the time?

Burrus: Well, see, I was forty-five.

Fargo: Some guys have their midlife crisis, and they buy a Corvette; you had your midlife crisis and said, "I have to do something different to make this work," right?

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: That was a good thing.

Burrus: And it was a challenge, also. You know, that was a big thing, to do something with those hills different than what most people were doing.

Fargo: I know what you sell is organic, right?

Burrus: Right.

Fargo: So was there a lot of red tape? Tell me about that whole process, where you can get certified as organic.

Burrus: Well, there's a three-year transition period where you can't apply any chemicals to your land. We didn't have a problem with that because our pasture had never had commercial fertilizer on it. My dad thought it was kind of like waste ground, really. It was just, put the cows out there and forget about them. So they really didn't spend money on fertilizer for the pastures, and we didn't spray them. Anything we did was mechanical, as far as cutting brush and trees and fixing fence. So that three-year transition was pretty easy. Now, we are transitioning another farm to the north of us, and it's going through a three-year transition period. We've used oats to transition, and then alfalfa, and we're at the end of our three-year transition period this year.

Fargo: That's neat. And the cattle get to eat the oats and the alfalfa?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: And the chickens—what do they eat?

Burrus: They eat corn and soybeans?

Fargo: But it's organic corn and—

Burrus: It's organic. I purchase that from a farmer in Carlock, Illinois.

Fargo: So you guys kind of all have a network going, I assume—all the guys that believe in organic. And you know, the bottom line is, does it taste better?

Burrus: I think grass-fed beef, organic beef, tastes more like beef should taste. It doesn't have an off flavor. It tastes like meat.

Fargo: Tender and—

Burrus: Yes, it does.

Fargo: Do you think it's been healthier? Since you've been doing this several years—and I know you and your wife Mary eat this—do you feel better, that it's better for you nutritionally or whatever?

Burrus: I think the nutritional benefits are a positive influence on us. You know, they say "you are what you eat," and we really feel that way. We get the nutrients out of the grass, and that's what cattle are supposed to eat. So we do.

Fargo: Do you think the cattle ever long for corn, or do you think they're pretty happy on grass?

Burrus: Cattle like corn because it's sweet. You know, it's like candy, so they like it. Cattle would eat anything, really. You know, they'll eat anything. But they're ruminants, and you don't have to worry about cattle. They can eat as much grass as they want and do fine.

Fargo: Is there a particular breed of cattle you use that does better on the grass-fed?

Burrus: There are breeds that they say do better on grass. We use Angus. There are certain genetics in the Angus breed that they say do better on grass, and we try to use those genetics.

Fargo: Can it still be the certified Angus beef—you know, that's a real big deal to be able to say cert—so it could still—even if it was grass-fed, could it still say "certified Angus beef"?

Burrus: It could, yes. It could.

Fargo: Is it more expensive to buy—and can you buy it at any supermarkets, or do you just have to buy it at specialty places, or directly from a farm?

Burrus: Certified organic beef, grass-fed beef, is—the market is really not built up yet to where you can buy it in all stores. There are places, you know, like Minneapolis and Wisconsin and your bigger retail markets that you can buy it in stores, but mainly, it's purchased privately.

Fargo: So thank God for the Internet that you can just Google and say, "I want grass-fed beef," and all these people that sell it come up, including you, right?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: Yeah, that's cool, that's cool. Tell me about some of the challenges that you've had in doing this. You know, farmers are an interesting group in that they always watch what their neighbor is doing. Have your neighbors thought you were crazy?

Burrus: Oh, I think so. I think so. (laughter) When we started, we put in 10,000 feet of water line in our pastures, and when we started doing that, I think, people were asking questions. What's he doing out there? I think so. But I got over that hump; it doesn't bother me anymore.

Fargo: Well, and they can see that you're obviously a success, so that speaks for itself, I'm sure. Do you still go to these seminars to help you learn about this? I mean, are there any areas that have been particularly hard for you to say, Man, I can't quite figure that out?

Burrus: Yeah, I do. We're self-taught; we have to go to seminars and conventions. Last year, we went to the organic convention in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and also a new one starting up, the Midwest organic convention in Champaign, Illinois last year; next year it's going to be in Indiana. And then I go to the grazing conference in Wisconsin every year. You meet people, and that's where you learn from.

Fargo: I bet you've met a lot of good friends.

Burrus: I have.

Fargo: Yeah, because it really becomes almost a little—I won't say society—but a friendship, that people who believe in the same thing and do the same thing. You mentioned that you keep your cattle longer. Are they bigger than other cattle that go to market sooner?

Burrus: No, they're about the same size. I try to have a 700-pound carcass weight. I feel economically that's what I need, to do well selling retail product. So they're about the same size—700-750-pound carcass.

Fargo: You know, you've been in this since, what, '95?

Burrus: Ninety-five.

Fargo: So thirteen years, right?

Burrus: Right.

Fargo: If you had to look in your crystal ball, where do you see this going? I'm sure it's much more accepted now than it was thirteen years ago when you started. Do you see the next thirteen years, that it's really going to catch on, and this is going to be the kind of beef that most of us eat in America?

Burrus: It's growing rapidly. It's actually growing faster than we can grow the beef. The grass base isn't there. You know, you have to have more grass.

Fargo: Right. That's because we've taken our grass out of production and raised corn because corn prices are high, right?

Burrus: That's right. We've converted cropland into grass, and you need more grass. We just lost that grass base, so it's going to take a while to get enough beef cattle out there to be available in a lot of stores.

Fargo: One of the reasons you said you did this is because you wanted to turn that pasture into something that was more profitable. Has it worked? You know, in thirteen years, can you look back and say, "Man, that was definitely the right thing to do?"

Burrus: Yes, yes. We grow better grass by the rotation. We manage that pasture now; we don't just—

Fargo: And is there a grass rotation that you do? Like grass to oats to—I don't know.

Burrus: No, we pretty much stay with perennial grasses.

Fargo: Okay. Have you made money with this?

Burrus: Yeah, we've done pretty well with this, really.

Fargo: Good. So it's something you'd recommend to somebody else trying or whatever?

Burrus: Yes. I've helped a lot of people start in grass-fed beef.

Fargo: That's good. Looking at a bigger picture, do you think this is a better way for agriculture to sustain itself?

Burrus: It can be sustainable. We're in the process now of trying to be sustainable. We do buy organic hay off the farm, and we are presently trying to raise all of our feed.

Fargo: What I mean, though, is agriculture—for the past fifty years, if you will—we're sort of dependent on the government; in case prices go down, there's always been a floor there to prop farmers up to help them because agriculture is so important to our nation. It's at a point now where a lot of times we're in the midst of trying to get a farm bill passed, and there's concern that, Oh, there's too much money, that cost, and is this the way to finally get off that roller coaster?

Burrus: Oh, it is. It is, very much so, and that's what I'd love to do. They say farming is a business, and not many businesses are really dependent on the government like agriculture is.

Fargo: And even farmers wish it wasn't that way.

Burrus: That's true. They would like to have good prices for their crops—whatever they sell. With grass-fed beef and selling it retail, that's possible.

Fargo: Well, it is, because instead of the market saying, "This is what you're going to get"—the Chicago Board of Trade or whatever for that corn—you are able to set the price for your meat—which is the way it should be. Everybody else does that, don't they?

Burrus: That's right. Everybody else does that in business.

Fargo: That's good. Do you have any thoughts about how, in the next few years, you hope to change or expand or make this better?

Burrus: I'm trying to become more sustainable, to raise everything on the farm so we don't have to go off-farm to buy hay. I think that would make it better.

Fargo: So would you turn some of your cropland into raising more alfalfa?

Burrus: Yeah, and that, we have been doing. We've been putting more cropland into grassland.

Fargo: Do you have children?

Burrus: I have one daughter.

Fargo: Is she into all this?

Burrus: Actually, she buys and sells natural gas, and she likes the farm and she likes the meat.

Fargo: So you supply her with meat, I'm sure. Dad. (laughter)

Burrus: Yes. But she doesn't work on the farm.

Fargo: One of the other things you hope to see in agriculture is that the kids don't always leave, that there's a place for them. I don't know if she's married or not, but if she has kids, maybe someday they'll be able to—I'm sure that would be a dream of yours for them to take it on.

Burrus: She does have kids. Heather would actually probably be a better business person than I am. She's pretty sharp, and she could make this run.

Fargo: So that's kind of the long-range goal.

Burrus: Yeah, I'd like to see someone come back and—

Fargo: And take the remodeled house and—

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: Yeah. (laughter) It's good. Well, I think what you're doing is great. I know it always takes courage to do something different, especially in the agriculture

world, because everybody seems to watch everybody else and do it just the way they do. When you go to bed at night, what gives you that courage?

Burrus: To keep going on this? You know, you're determined to do something different and make an impact on other people, and I've seen that happen.

Fargo: What's most rewarding about it?

Burrus: I think teaching other people.

Fargo: When somebody comes to your farm and gets the meat and tells you they love it?

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: That has to be rewarding.

Burrus: It is; it is.

Fargo: Do people by half a steer, or they buy a quarter-steer, or do they just buy steaks or roasts or whatever?

Burrus: We sell mainly quarters and halves, and sometimes wholes, and then we do sell packaged meat out of the freezer.

Fargo: Now, if somebody wanted to look on the Internet to find out more about you or where to buy it or whatever, what's your website?

Burrus: We advertise on two websites. One is eatwild.com.

Fargo: eat wild?

Burrus: eatwild.com.

Fargo: Okay, e-a-t-w-i-l-d.com?

Burrus: Yes, yes. And the other one is Local Harvest.

Fargo: Local Harvest?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: Dot-com?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: So do you come in at night and check your e-mails all the time?

Burrus: I do. I check them twice a day, usually.

Fargo: Twice a day, to see if somebody—and then you get back to them or whatever if they want it?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: Boy, that's something your dad and your grandpa never did. (laughter)

Burrus: No, no.

Fargo: That's good. That's good. Anything else that I haven't asked you that you want to share about your operation or your business?

Burrus: No, I can't think of anything.

Fargo: Well, I think what you're doing is great.

Burrus: Thank you.

Warren: Could we add a couple more questions?

Fargo: Absolutely.

Warren: We'd like detailed description of the farm: how big it is, and maybe how many acres you've got for pasture, and how many acres you've got for alfalfa now, and then your corn and soybeans. Also, if you do butchering here, do you do that yourself, or how is that done? So those might be two more questions to ask.

Fargo: All right. Jim, go back with me a bit and tell me a more about your operation—how many acres you have, how much grass, how much alfalfa, how much corn that you raise.

Burrus: Okay, there's 619 acres in the farm, and it's about fifty-fifty as far as grass and tillable land. We have thirty-one acres of alfalfa. And—

Fargo: Corn?

Burrus: There's 150 acres of corn and 150 acres of beans.

Fargo: Fifty-fifty. Okay. And you've got your corn planted now, and working on the beans—if it ever dries up, right? When you mentioned people buying the beef, you don't actually butcher it here, do you? You send it to a processor?

Burrus: We have two processors we use. We use one in Northern Illinois. He's certified organic—the only certified organic processor in the state of Illinois.

Fargo: And do you have to take the cattle up to him in the trailer?

Burrus: Yes, we haul the live cattle to him, and the calf becomes th… Whoever purchases it, they put in their order how they want it processed.

Fargo: How much they want to go to steaks and how much they want to go to hamburger?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: Okay. And the chickens?

Burrus: They're processed in Arthur, Illinois; they're the only certified organic processor, in [Illinois].

Fargo: Okay, so if I bought a chicken from you, would I get it from your farm, or would I go over to Arthur and get it, or either one?

Burrus: The chicken, you would get here at the farm. We take the chickens over and have them processed and then bring them home that day.

Fargo: Do you have a big trailer that you haul the chickens, or how do you get the chickens there?

Burrus: I take them in the livestock trailer.

Fargo: In the livestock—and they like that ride, I'm sure. (laughter) I don't know, I've never thought about chickens riding in the trailer. That's cute. Are the chickens noisy? Do they keep you up?

Burrus: No.

Fargo: Because they're out on the pasture, just what we'd call free range, right?

Burrus: They're not free range. They're actually in pens; they're pastured poultry, and we move the pens every day.

Fargo: Okay, so they have new grass to eat, or—

Burrus: Every day. Yes.

Fargo: Well, that's quite an operation. How long does it take you to do chores every day?

Burrus: Oh, gosh, it depends on what needs to be done. But normally, during the winter it can take two or three hours; during the summer, probably maybe an hour and a half.

Fargo: And so vacations have to be scheduled around the livestock. Or maybe you don't take vacations?

Burrus: Well, we take off and we go to conventions and things, and usually they're in off-season.

Fargo: And so do you have somebody else come—a neighbor come in—and water or whatever?

Burrus: I have a neighbor that helps out and does that, yes.

Fargo: Yeah, because I know—otherwise, it's like hard to get away sometimes, isn't it?

Burrus: It is. It's every time.

Fargo: Kind of a good routine, though?

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: And rain, snow, sunshine, or not, you're out there doing it.

Burrus: Yes, it doesn't matter.

Fargo: Like the mailman.

Burrus: Yeah. (laughter)

Warren: We might cover veterinary aspects—disease—I don't know if you've ever had any bloat problems with the cattle or anything like that. So you might ask about medical issues.

Fargo: Okay. It seems to me like these cattle would be pretty healthy, but do you have any special veterinary things that you have to do with them and the chickens, or are they healthier than others because they're not getting any of the chemicals and stuff?

Burrus: They are a lot healthier. We used to wean our calves—take our calves off the cow, put them in a lot, feed them something that they'd never seen before, take their mom away. Now we wean the calf on grass, and you know, he's 60 percent weaned anyhow. He's been eating grass his entire life. We have not had one sick calf since we started this.

Fargo: Wow, so your veterinary bills have actually gone down, not up.

Burrus: Our veterinary bill last year was zero.

Fargo: Wow, that's amazing.

Burrus: If something happens—a complication with birthing or something like that—then we have a veterinary... And we do a few things, but—

Fargo: You know, one of the things that's always a problem with livestock, it seems, are flies, a lot of times. Does this kind of help eliminate the fly problem, because they're not all congregated?

Burrus: Actually, a cow has their own immunity to flies. We used to use fly control, and the more fly control we used, the more flies we had. So it took a while to get that immunity built up back in the cattle. Well, when my father got sick, he wasn't able to help; so I decided they just had to do it on their own. That was five years ago, and we just don't have a fly problem anymore.

Fargo: Wow, that's great. Did your father finally think this was a good idea?

Burrus: He thought it all the way along. Whenever I started with the pasture, he was behind me 100 percent.

Fargo: Oh, that's great. That's great to have his blessing, isn't it?

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: Yeah, there's nothing like having that. Knowing that he did it a different way, but that he could see that this was maybe a better way to do it. That's good.

Warren: Anything else you can think of, Mike?

Maniscalco: Childhood? Because you grew up on this farm, right?

Fargo: Oh, that's a good idea. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood?

Burrus: Oh, golly. I don't know. What do you want to know? (laughter)

Fargo: Well, you grew up here. You went to school around her. So did the school bus come and take you to school?

Burrus: Yeah, the school bus picked us up right outside.

Fargo: Did you have to get up and do chores before you got on the school bus?

Burrus: I did. Actually, I had my own hogs since I was nine years old. I started in 4-H with one spotted Poland China gelt that Dad bought me, and from that time on, why, I took care of them and paid for the feed and the housing and worked up to twenty sows when I quit when I was eighteen years old. Before that, I helped Dad with his hogs and cows.

Fargo: And you decided not to go on and have more hogs?

Burrus: Well, I went to school at Lincoln Land, and then I got a job at Kroger's and worked for them. And Mary and I got married. I came back to the farm when Dad retired in 1978, and I didn't go back into hogs.

Fargo: Did you and Mary meet at the grocery store, or where did you guys meet?

Burrus: We actually met at Lincoln Land Community College.

Fargo: Oh, you were both going to class.

Burrus: Yeah, and we're both from Jacksonville, but we didn't know each other. (laughter) We were both in school, yeah.

Fargo: That's great. You've been married how many years?

Burrus: Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine. Going on thirty-nine.

Fargo: Thirty-nine wonderful years, right, Jim? (laughter)

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: That's great.

Maniscalco: What about the comparison of being a country kid compared to some of the town kids?

Burrus: Well, you know, I was a town kid for a while. We lived in town.

Fargo: And your dad would drive to the farm then?

Burrus: No. Dad—

Fargo: Because the grandparents lived here?

Burrus: No, my dad lived here.

Fargo: I don't understand how you guys lived in town for a while.

Burrus: When we got married.

Fargo: Oh, when you first got married. Okay, I got you.

Burrus: When we went to school—went to Lincoln Land and went to school.

Fargo: But you prefer the country life?

Burrus: Yes.

Fargo: Because?

Burrus: Well, there's more freedom. You're just out here by yourself.

Fargo: Do you guys raise a big garden, too?

Burrus: Not yet, but we—my wife— .

Fargo: If you're going to have that—100-Mile Diet?

Burrus: Yeah.

Fargo: —100-Mile Diet, you've got to have your tomatoes. (laughter)

Burrus: Right, well, we have tomatoes, and we have some peppers.

Fargo: That's on the list, huh?

Burrus: Yeah, that's on the list.

Maniscalco: And what were your friends like?

Warren: When you were a kid.

Maniscalco: When you were a kid.

Burrus: You know, there was a boy up in Arcadia, which is about a mile north: Dennis Braner, and I'd go up there at the store, and we'd play. Then I had another friend, Tom Patterson, that lived just south of me here. We were the same age. They were right in the neighborhood here. There was a farm neighbor here that we met in the pasture one day, kind of. He'd made a cave in this ditch, is what it was, and there was a bunch of brush over the top, so we'd call that the cave, and we'd go up there and meet in this cave. So that was how we played. We played down here in the creek; I learned to ice skate down here in the creek. Yeah, I guess it was different than it is today.

Warren: And might talk about schooling, from your grade school, middle school, high school.

Burrus: Okay, went to North Jacksonville School, and then I went to Jacksonville High School, and then Lincoln Land.

Fargo: Did you play sports?

Burrus: No, I didn't. I attempted to play basketball in junior high, but I guess I wasn't good enough, so—

Fargo: Not tall enough.

Burrus: —got cut from the squad. (laughter)

Warren: This is good, this is good.

Fargo: Thank you, Jim.

Warren: One thing we'd like to do is, if you could take us out to take pictures of some of the cattle and maybe some of the farm buildings and get a little better, more of a pictorial representation of what your life is like out here. It will take us a little while to turn all this stuff off and get it put away, but we also want to take some

still photos of you and your wife—maybe at the fireplace, or maybe outside—wherever might be best. And we need a picture of you, too, okay?

Fargo: Okay.