

Tacoma Community History Project
FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Narrator: Kevin Jensen
Date: May 5, 2020
Interviewed By: Nora White
Place: Olympia, WA & Tenino, WA – met online

[Nora White]: Awesome, so these are my formal questions. This is Nora White, I'm interviewing Kevin Jensen for TIAS 515, Themes in the Interpretation of Culture. It's May 5, 2020. Kevin, do I have your permission to record this interview?

[Kevin Jensen]: Yes

[NW]: And is it alright if you if I include this conversation in my final project and transcribe your interview to go in the UWT library?

[KJ]: Yes, that's fine.

[NW]: Okay, awesome. Thank you. So I am in class. I'm in a Master's program at the UW right now, and the class I'm in right now is an oral histories class, so we're all doing kind of in depth profiles of people during this time of COVID-19 to learn a little bit about how they and their work is being impacted. Our professors in particular, passionate around labor studies, and so we're all kind of looking at different sub sectors of the job market and how people are being impacted and naturally, I thought, I would talk to farmers. So that's kind of been my project and trying to talk to a couple different folks and get different perspectives and different parts of farming represented. So thank you very much. I really appreciate you lending me your time.

[KJ]: Yeah.

[NW]: So I'm going to start with just a few kind of background questions and then move a little bit into this current time. So I know Riverbend Ranch is a multigenerational ranch. Can you tell me a little bit of the ranch's history?

[KJ]: Sure, so Riverbend Ranch - We started the farm and around 1980 and so we acquired about half of the farm in 1980 and then the other half we acquired a 1996. So the history goes back to 1980 here. That was when my dad and my grandpa first purchased the first section. But we also have another farm, sister farm, in Yelm. And so that farm started in the late 1920s. So I'm fourth generation, my kids are fifth. So we still run that farm. It's right on Lake Lawrence and my cousins and my grandfather and my aunt run that. And then we have the Tenino farm. So, yeah, between the two farms it's always been hay and beef cattle and timber, pretty much.

[NW]: What do they raise at the ranch in Yelm?

[KJ]: Commercial timber and a couple hundred acres of hay. And they run about 200 mother cows – beef cows. And so yeah, whereas we, on the Tenino farm – Riverbend Ranch, we've kind of branched out and done a few other things: Christmas trees, wedding venue, and things like that. But our roots basically go back to cow/calf beef ranching and grazing.

[NW]: Yeah, that's interesting that your family's farm originally started around here around the same time as the Great Depression and now we're kind of like a bit of a mirror, you know, now we're in this different economic situation too.

[KJ]: Yeah, it would be interesting to go back to my great great grandfather and have a chat with him about the times then and the times now. I don't think he had an iPhone, but I bet he had the same kind of feelings going on with ag industry.

[NW]: Absolutely, yeah would be really interesting to see records of what ag was like in this area during that time or who they sold to, I don't know.

[KJ]: Well logging was big back then, you know, and it still is today. Commercial timber is kind of the roots of this area. But because of the open prairies, cattle kind of, you know, migrated in just because of the temperate climate. Good place to raise cows before all the people! [laughs]

[NW]: Yeah, absolutely. Growing up, did you always know that you were going to work the ranch as an adult? Or how did that transition [go]? What was that like for you?

[KJ]: No, I didn't. I mean, I was obviously born and raised in ag – in 4-H and FFA and everything I've ever done is ag related, but I wasn't sure if I was going to come back and run the farm. I had a little inclination to just kind of move out of the State, go down to Texas and run cattle down there, but once I got over to WSU and spent four years there I kind of learned to appreciate what I was born into, the legacy that I had grown up in and didn't realize sometimes it's hard to see the forest from the trees. So, after being away from it kind of realize in this huge opportunity that it could be. I decided to come back and plan on working into managing the farm, which my wife and I are going to move into that role in 2021.

[NW]: Oh, cool! And your brother lives on farm also, right?

[KJ]: Yeah, we all live on the farm. My parents live on one side, my wife and my kids and I live on the other side, my brother, his wife and their new baby live kinda in the middle. But yeah, we're on the farm. He works. He works part time, or he did until the COVID hit. He works part time for a chiropractor and part time on the farm, kind of similar to what I do. And currently in my parents and my wife are the only folks full time on the farm.

[NW]: In an ordinary year, not this year, what does your business and marketing look like? You said you guys have branched out a bit – in an ordinary year, I suppose, what does that look like for you guys?

[KJ]: So, I mean, there's never really a downtime for us. So I guess January 1 our calves, our baby calves, start hitting the ground. Generally the bulk of our calving happens in January. And so right now, it's a slower time right now. Calving is done, grass is growing, and we're getting ready to cut silage here in about a week or so. But, you know, there's stuff going on. Typically the spring- like March, April- is when we're rebuilding fences, getting ready for the grazing season, fixing equipment that broke over the winter. A lot of things break over the winter, so we try to fix that between, you know, when the weather gets a little better and before we start hay. Yeah, so once silage kicks off next week or so, we basically hay on and off through July/mid July.

[NW]: Do you irrigate your hay fields?

[KJ]: Yeah. So we start irrigating when the rain shuts off. So it's typically been in May. If we can keep getting rains like we've been getting, these spring rains, then there's no point in irrigating. But as soon as the rain shuts off, we start pumping water. And we typically keep about 100 acres under irrigation.

[NW]: And the wedding venue runs probably pretty heavy through spring and summer too, right?

[KJ]: We've done it in such a way that the weddings don't start until July. We've done May or June weddings in the past, but with haying season going on, it's challenging, especially now with kids, so typically my wife starts weddings July 1. And then we run weddings through the summer. But this summer I don't know what's gonna happen.

[NW]: Yeah, I talked to Krystal about that a little bit the other week when she called me. Sounds like probably one of the biggest changes.

[KJ]: That that's our biggest challenge right now as far as our farm goes- the wedding venue. Of course, any of our direct marketing for me is great. Challenging just trying to answer the interest that people have, but the flip side is the wedding venue where it's basically illegal to have one right now so when you have the summer booked up for weddings and the folks are calling you saying "what do we do?" you know, what do you do? I don't know. When's the last time we had a pandemic with Coronavirus? So, it's hard. Nobody knows what to do. So it's very challenging. It's been really stressful for our family on how to deal with that, as it would be stressful, you know, if I was planning to have my wedding somewhere. It's not just the venue...

[NW]: I know several people that have cancelled theirs.

[KJ]: Yeah. Yeah it's challenging time for sure. And then yeah, move through summer, we usually irrigate till the rains come back in like September. And during August, we have obviously have weddings, summer projects during the dry season, and we start weaning our

calves in August. So, and then fall time. We also start calving. We fall calve. The majority of our cows spring calve, which is really late winter calving. But I have about 30/35 head that calve in the fall, and they start calving in August/September. So we start calving again around that time. And then, yeah, move into fall, get ready for winter. And really, at that point, September/October is gearing up for Christmas tree season. Through the year there's Christmas tree stuff going on- there's some mowing and pruning and things like that. Here we also try to irrigate the trees a little bit. Yeah, and around October we get ready for Christmas tree season. The wholesale trees that we cut out- we usually start cutting those on Halloween. Really Christmas trees start late October. And then of course the u-cut kicks off the day after Thanksgiving.

[NW]: Do your wholesale Christmas trees go into any kind of cold storage or do they just go straight to distributors?

[KJ]: No. They go straight to like McLendon's, Home Depot, and things like that. Yeah, they go right to the stores.

[NW]: So, I suppose, other than the wedding changes this spring, at what point did you feel like you kind of started to see a difference in the meat buying for beef and pork? Did you start to feel that immediately or did it gradually creep up on you? How's that gone?

[KJ]: It's been -I would say it's been gradual. Let's see. I stopped going to work the second week of March, and it was around that time – spring is usually busy. People looking for beef, you know, we get, I don't know, a dozen emails a week or something. But we started getting at least double that. And so we kind of started thinking, well, you know, that time there's a toilet paper shortage and that's basically the only shortage there was, so with everything going on, we didn't really think that we would be where we are now, but it was a little nerve wracking. And then I would say by the end of March/first part of April the gates kind of opened up. That's when, right about the time that first slaughterhouse back East closed down because of COVID. I think that's about the time people started going “Oh, our meat supply is going to be just like the toilet paper. We gotta buy like crazy.” And it's just been kind of a whirlwind from there, and it hasn't slowed down. I don't know how many emails I've got today. I'm scared to actually look, but you know, what Krystal and I do, and everything we do, it's not like we got HR in the front to be the intake email service or whatever. So we basically get the kids down for night after dinner and then we sit down on the couch and break out some emails, but it's been challenging. I don't know what it's gonna look like.

[NW]: Are you guys sold out?

[KJ]: Yeah, we're sold out right now, until, like, January/February '21.

[NW]: Wow. Of beef and pork?

[KJ]: Yeah, I'm trying to get - we're gonna preg check some cows here pretty soon, and if they're open, we're gonna pull them out and hamburger the cows, or I mean quarter, halve, and whole all those. But the other the other problem with all this going on is our local butcher shops are also booked until '21 now. So if you don't have processing dates on the books, you're not getting anything butchered this year.

[NW]: Wow.

[KJ]: That's very, you know, that's kind of the other half of our businesses is the butcher shop. I mean, without that... we don't we don't have a direct marketing business, so fortunately we overbooked. Krystal kind of saw the writing on the wall and she started booking dates like crazy. So we have probably double for the animals we have. So we have some wiggle room, but it's going to be challenging for other folks that don't have that, and if they end up having animal to process... You know, legally, you can't really do it yourself, unless you're State inspected. So I don't know what would happen at that point.

[NW]: Yeah. That's interesting. I hadn't heard that from people yet, but that makes sense.

[KJ]: Yeah, no, I've talked to- I use three butchers and they all said "we have no days left this year." which is unheard of. This time of year, I can call my Centralia butcher on Friday and say I want to haul a beef in tomorrow. And then on a normal year...

[NW]: Yeah.

[KJ]: Yeah, so. It's good because people are, I think, realizing how volatile supermarkets really are and maybe it will bring them closer to home as far as purchasing their protein or their food in general.

[NW]: Yeah. It does seem that way. Lots of veggie farms are selling out too.

[KJ]: Yeah. Folks aren't accustomed to, you know, having to call and then wait, you know, a month or two for a quarter of beef and they don't know what a quarter is and they don't know what comes in a quarter and there's a lot of back and forth information that's tied to that. But ultimately, you know, the folks that do order like this will like it if it's grown from our farm or other local farms, and hopefully this is a long term kind of boon for our local direct marketing farms.

[NW]: Yeah, you get new customers now and hopefully they stay as customers. Absolutely.

[KJ]: Right.

[NW]: Other than butcher shortages, are you seeing any other kinds of like materials or things like that that you're having a hard time accessing?

[KJ]: We're fortunate that we produce 100% of our own feed. So as long as I can buy diesel. Which I don't think that's going to be a problem with this market. As long as I can buy diesel and make my tractors go, we can make feed. And of course, this time of year, Mother Nature's making the feed, so we're very, very fortunate to have that. If I was 100% reliant on outside sources for feed I would definitely be a little nervous right now. I know there's some drought stuff going on in Eastern Oregon and a lot of hay comes out of that country, so yeah and you know people, local folks, are feeding more animals to supply the meat. It's going to take more hay, so I don't really know, but I anticipate going into this winter there's going to be a shortage of hay. Just a guess, but everything else, you know, yeah, I see that coming.

[NW]: I think that's a good guess.

[KJ]: But yeah, other than that. We don't have really any other inputs. So as long as we have enough fuel to make the tractors go to make the hay, that's really all we need. We have water and sometimes we get sunshine, so we're good.

[NW]: Have you guys needed to or sought out any small farm assistance or small business loans or anything like that?

[KJ]: No. We don't have employees so we haven't really looked at it. I know my wife filed for unemployment because it sounded like she was eligible - being a small business owner. It's been, I think, three weeks now, two weeks now, no response just says 'application received'. I don't know if it's ever gonna happen. Which sounds like pretty common, going around the state right now, so we did apply for that, but other than that, no we haven't applied for any assistance. If we had employees then we probably would- the payroll protection or whatever that one is. But yeah, the joys of being owner/operator, you basically eat it and try to do whatever you can do to stay alive.

[NW]: Is there any other kind of assistance for small farms that you think would be helpful right now that isn't being offered?

[KJ]: I mean, there are the small business loans, like the super low interest loans to the small businesses. What is it? The SBA or whatever it is. So I think if I had some other kind of retail shop or something like that I would definitely be applying for that. Really the only thing that drastically impacted our balance is the wedding venue, but it hasn't really started it. So really we don't have weddings until July, so we don't know which things are going to be in when that happens and we might be in phase three, where they can still have a gathering, but 50 people, which then they can still do the wedding. And at that point, you know, it's business as usual. There will be no need for a loan, but if we're in phase one in July then things get a little iffy. And my wife has offered folks to reschedule for the next year, which is good for them because they don't lose their money, but it's bad for us because we don't get paid for that slot again. So...

[NW]: Yeah. Half as many...

[KJ]: I don't know. Yeah, it's contingency just trying to: "we're going to lose here, so try to gain somewhere else to keep it going". And we don't even know - we actually just had a little powwow when we were working some cows earlier and Krystal goes "what if we can open the [Christmas tree] booth all this water?" And, you know, six, seven months down the road but there's a lot of people that come through there, so I don't know how. I guess we just don't open. I mean the trees are still going to be there the following years [laughing]. But yeah you have a lot of, you know, we had a lot of inputs throughout the years to make them look good and get them ready to go. So I don't know. Way too many unknowns to make any decisions, but us and other farms and businesses really need to be thinking about what's fall, winter, spring of '21 going to look like. And be ready for something. If this thing hangs around and comes back this next winter like they say it's going to and we shut down again, we need to be prepared for that.

[NW]: Right, and with a crop like beef that there's such, like you say, people aren't accustomed to that wait time and it seems like all of a sudden you get burdened with a lot of customer education as well. And just kind of helping people reframe what normal is.

[KJ]: Mean yeah, yeah. [talk over each other]. Go ahead.

[NW]: Well, yeah, like you say, I think it's just a flexibility and trying to keep everybody understanding and compassionate

[KJ]: Mmhhh, yeah. We try to do everything electronically so we can trail it. And try not to do anything on the phone. That seems to help organize a little better. And I've got PDFs made up, and I had them posted on the website so we can quickly send out a one pager - Frequently Asked Questions thing- to help mitigate some of the questions. But I mean folks are used to going to the grocery store and buying a bunch of meat.

[NW]: And they're used to it looking a certain way and being labeled a certain way.

[KJ]: Yeah. Right. But everything's different.

[NW]: And are you working your day job full time from home right now?

[KJ]: Yeah. Yeah I'm still working 45 hours a week for the State. Oh yeah, I work weird hours. Early in the morning, a little bit in the middle of the day, late at night. Maybe a couple extra hours in the middle of the day. I just basically told my boss "don't let me write a schedule down for you cause it's gonna make your brain hurt." But I'm getting my work done, so that's all that I can tell ya. [laughs]

[NW]: Yeah. I know you guys are home with kids and stuff too. Any other kind of big impacts for your family during this time?

[KJ]: I think we're feeling the impact, like everybody else, the social isolation. You know, we can't run down to the neighbors and let our kids play with their kids. My daughter has kind of a little bit of a learning disability and she likes playing very scheduled and we had some in-home therapy plus pre preschool going on, and that shut off like overnight so she struggled for at least a couple of weeks with the change I mean she basically went from having friends and seeing all these people and then doing scheduled tasks to staying in the house, and that's it. And we had really crappy weather that time in March, and they couldn't go outside and it was like a living nightmare in our house like I don't think any of us wanted to be in house together. And then finally, once the sun comes out, they can get outside and play.

[NW]: Yeah.

[KJ]: I think social isolation, and I mean I like talking to people and it's been very challenging for me.

[NW]: I know, I've been working from home too and it's just all day, every day just in my house. It's real boring.

[KJ]: Right. Yeah, and I think I didn't go in for, but I think this is great for businesses because I think a lot of businesses can have their employees work from home. And I think it's just they were forced in the punch to try it out and I'm hoping that they continue to offer it and then that frees up that many cars off the road so we can actually drive somewhere.

[NW]: Yeah, totally. That kind of big lifestyle change could be a positive outcome I think.

[KJ]: With mine, I'm hoping my boss will allow teleworking a couple days a week or something too, just, I don't know. I think I still want to be in the office at least a day or two a week just to get stuff done without any distractions. But I mean, I'm not having to wake up an hour and a half and go out crazy hours to feed cows. I mean, I can do my work and walk outside when the sun shines at 10 o'clock in the morning and feed cows, so for my lifestyle this is way better. And I'm not so crazy stressed out. Sure save a lot of money on gas. [laughs]

[NW]: Yes! I feel that too. Although about the only place I am driving is out to Tenino to go to the farm there and work there when I'm not working here, so...

[KJ]: Yeah, I mean, my wife and I are on the road all the time. I bet I don't even know how many several hundred dollars a month we're saving them feel, but it's significant.

[NW]: It's interesting, there's like some places where there's increased costs and some places where yeah, I've been able to really save. It will just be interesting how it all shakes out.

[KJ]: Yeah. That's the thing. You're gonna. Yeah, you gotta plan to lose it, and then gain it where you can and just keep going forward. And that's really all you can do. And I mean,

anybody that's farmed for any number of years. This is just, it's just another day. And this is, you know, the weather storm rolls in and smokes the crop. The pest hits the crop. I mean, you know, whatever – floods - it's all, it's not like this is like the first pandemic to really you know cripple or put a hurting on ag. You see that in ag. There's always something trying to destroy you. Normally it's more isolated. But you just gotta have kind of thick skin and just keep looking ahead and make it where you can and loose it where you don't have any control, and keep going forward.

[NW]: That's a healthy perspective I think. The first week that all this happened was the same week that all our sheep lambed so it was just so normal. I wasn't gonna be at work anyway cause that's what was happening. It was so perfectly distracting actually. It was great.

[KJ]: Yeah.

[NW]: Probably went better than it would have if we hadn't had this going on because we have a little bit more time and energy to pay attention to everybody, so..

[KJ]: Mm hmm. Yeah. I mean, I haven't been around my kids this much their whole lives so, I don't know that they like it or not, but I enjoy being around them more.

[NW]: That's awesome!

[KJ]: Yeah.

[NW]: Well that's the majority of the questions that I had. You just kind of answered him talking through so, like I said, I'm gonna include some of this and I interviewed a veggie farm as well and a lot of this kind of research around how small farms have been impacted and write something up. I'll send it to you if you want.

[KJ]: Sounds good!

[NW]: Thank you so much, Kevin. I'm glad to hear that you guys are making do, and being creative, and staying hopeful. It's really nice to hear.

[KJ]: Yeah, no we're getting by. We'll survive this, just like my four generations before me survived it.

[NW]: Yeah, right on. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. Stay safe and stay well and we'll see ya soon.

[KJ]: Sounds good, Nora. Appreciate it. Have a good day.

[NW]: Thanks Kevin, you too.

[KJ]: Bye.

[NW]: Bye.