

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Alonzo Willoughby Jr. by Tessa Desmond
Conducted on September 27th, 2023 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **Tessa Desmond:** Today is September 27th, 2023. This is Tessa Lewinsky Desmond with the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project interviewing in Farmville, North Carolina. Thank you for sitting for this interview. Can you introduce yourself and tell us some things that feel important to share?

[00:00:19] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Yes, I'm Alonzo Willoughby Jr., and I'm from Farmville, North Carolina. As a matter of fact, I was raised up here in Farmville, about three miles out of town on a farm. As a matter of fact, it was the Allen, Ella Allen's farm. And we used to raise uh, crops like vegetables. It was the Ella Allen's farm, about three miles out of Farmville.

And I was born and raised out there, born in 1940. And I enjoyed the farm. I, we raised, uh, tobacco, cotton, corn, tomatoes, beans, two kind of beans, matter of fact, soybean, butter beans, peas, bell peppers, the regular peppers, white potatoes, sweet potatoes. We raised, uh, salad greens, cabbage, collards. Oh, we just went on and on with carrots and onions.

We raised oats, watermelons, hogs, cows, raised hay, and we fed the mules with. Chickens, turkeys, peach trees, strawberries, plums, to go on farther. We, uh, raised, uh, all types of, uh, vegetables like blueberries and, turkey berries and all that. And we just, we just had a, A glorious time out there on the farm.

We enjoyed doing it and that is part of my life.

[00:02:13] **Tessa Desmond:** How big was the farm? Who was working on the farm? What role did you play?

[00:02:21] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, the farm was about, about a hundred acres, a hundred acres or better. And I played the part at, before we had a John Deere tractor. I used to plow the mule a little bit, and we would, uh, then later we had the tractor.

We would use the tractor, and that stopped us from using the mules and horses. And then we had, we raised the pigs and hogs. We fed on the corn out of the field, and the cows. We got the milk from the cows, and back then, you could sell the milk. We sold milk to the peoples in here in Farmville. But now you can't do it, but uh, unless you have a license.

But we didn't even have a license then. We didn't have to have any. We made it, and it, it, it's a long story, I tell you. It's a long story, but it's a good story. We was able to, uh, survive, and we helped other people we gave, gave away a lot of watermelons, and corn, and collards, and cabbage, and white potatoes.

My daddy said, we're not gonna sell this stuff, we're just gonna give it to your friends, you know. You know, and we went from there, and now they're trying to sell everything. But back then, we gave, gave away a lot of stuff. Vegetables and all that. Potatoes, sweet potatoes, you name it.

[00:03:54] **Tessa Desmond:** And so you lived on the farm with your parents.

[00:03:56] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** With my parents, yes.

[00:03:58] **Tessa Desmond:** Are your grandparents near?

[00:04:00] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** No, they deceased.

[00:04:02] **Tessa Desmond:** But were they near the farm in Farmville, or where's your family from in North Carolina?

[00:04:07] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Right here in North Carolina. Right, grandparents too. Right here from Farmville, really. And later, later we moved out of the country into the city limits.

You know, into Farmville. Bought a house in Farmville, and we lived there here in Farmville. That happened in 1959.

Well, one thing, I, I moved out in '59 and moved to Connecticut, Stamford, Connecticut. And my sister was already in Stamford, Connecticut. So they had less help on the farm. Then my, my father's health was failing him, so it was time to leave. So they went on and bought a house and moved into Farmville.

And later they even ran a grocery store right on Main Street in Farmville, a small grocery store. Matter of fact, they have taken it, taken it down already now. But we, we actually had, uh, operated a grocery store and sold, you know, sodas and, they didn't want to sell beer and wine, but we, we didn't, we didn't sell alcohol. We did sell cigarettes and cigars, but we had, uh, plenty of everything else in that store.

[00:05:23] **Tessa Desmond:** So when you were living on the farm and you were growing all of these, you know, really diverse set of crops. Take me into your kitchen. What was cooking? What was on the stove? What did it smell like? What were your favorite things to eat?

[00:05:38] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, back, back then, it mostly was ham meat, collard greens, cabbage, white potatoes. And go out in the yard, we had plenty of chickens, about a, about a hundred. And we killed two or three chickens if we need, if we need that many. And we have, if we need. Barbecue chicken, and pastry, chicken pastry, and neck bones, and we killed our own hogs and everything, and we had plenty of, plenty of meat.

We lived, we lived good.

[00:06:12] **Tessa Desmond:** How were the collard greens prepared?

[00:06:15] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, we, normally we wash them about three or four times, pull that water off, and put them back in some fresh water, clean water. Make sure no grit was on the collard greens. We put the, some, maybe a strip of lamb, a strip of fat, or ham meat or something, ham hock, into the pot and let it boil with a little, maybe two or three inches of water, for about an hour.

And then, we put the collard greens in there after we have washed them and everything. And cook them, it depends on what time of the year. They cook faster after the frost will hit them. And after about 30 minutes, they'll be ready to take up, after about 30 or 40 minutes. And we have, we have plenty to give away or throw away. We always had plenty of food.

[00:07:05] **Tessa Desmond:** How much did your family buy from a market or a grocery store versus make, produce on their own?

[00:07:12] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Not very much. We only bought the flour and the meal, you know, some flour to make biscuits, and uh, for bread we had the cornmeal. And we, we had practically everything else. We had the chickens and pork chops from the, from the, the pigs and all, but we would put the, kill so many hogs every year, and we would cut the meat up and we had spareribs from the pig, and we ate pig feet, had pig feet, and pig tails, and all that, and tenderloin.

We had, we had plenty of good food, and every so often we'd kill a cow. We wouldn't wait till it got grown. We'd wait till it was maybe a little better than half grown. And we had beef, all kind of steak, so we, we didn't have to buy too much. We, we had it. We buy a bag of flour, a flour, maybe a 50 pound bag of flour and a 50 pound bag of meal, and we was good.

We buy a big 50 pound stand of lard, or either we use the oil for cooking. We had everything, just about we needed.

[00:08:24] **Tessa Desmond:** How did your parents learn to provide for themselves?

[00:08:30] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, it was passed on through generations. How to, how to, to do all this and believe it or not, my, my people who could cook, they was, they could really cook now.

You could smell it before we hit the main street cooking. Yeah, that's how, I mean, it really, you could smell, you almost tell what it was cooking. But you can't anymore because everything break, have been breaking down, broken down, you know. But um, back then, the food even tastes better. I know what I'm talking about.

It, it, it grows so fast now and you, the taste is not even there. But back then, we, we um, fed them, fed them all they wanted but we didn't try to put them on the market real quick, you know. We just kept them and sold them and cooked them, uh, killed them and cooked them for ourselves.

[00:09:28] **Tessa Desmond:** When your family moved from the farm and you moved to Connecticut, what was your feeling about the farm?

[00:09:36] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** I still felt good about it. I felt good about it. The farm, sure did, but I just wanted a better life. I wanted to get away from it, from doing that type of work. Because back then you didn't have tobacco harvesters and corn pickers and stuff. We had to go out there and do it by hand, you know. The tobacco and the corn, you had to break it by hand.

Now they had corn pickers and cotton pickers and all that. They had a few corn pickers and cotton pickers, but not many. Because we didn't own one, we didn't have one.

[00:10:12] **Tessa Desmond:** And who were the other people who were farming out there? Your neighbors? Were they friends?

[00:10:18] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Oh, it was nice. My, my, uh, mama's sister lived out there. And she had two sons that was farming, lived out there. And then we had other peoples that was friends. And everybody was really friendly. We got along well.

[00:10:37] **Tessa Desmond:** And did you come in to go to school?

[00:10:40] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Oh yeah, um, yeah I went to school, yeah sure. At that time, they didn't even have a bus, and we didn't let the bus go back there in the field. We had to walk out to the highway, three miles, then take the bus here, here and forward. But like I said, we lived three miles out of town.

[00:10:58] **Tessa Desmond:** So, in 1959, you moved to Connecticut.

[00:11:02] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Yes.

[00:11:03] **Tessa Desmond:** What did you do?

[00:11:05] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, I, I worked at, uh, plants, production, you know. And I had a couple of supervisor, supervisor jobs, you know.

[00:11:14] **Tessa Desmond:** And when did you come back to Farmville?

[00:11:16] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** In 69. Came back 10 years later.

[00:11:19] **Tessa Desmond:** So you've known Farmville a long time.

[00:11:22] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Oh, yes.

[00:11:23] **Tessa Desmond:** What are some changes that you've seen here that you've lived through?

[00:11:27] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, I, I've seen a lot of, a lot of changes because, uh, Farmville has really grown. And it was, it used to be well taken care of. But here lately, I found a lot of houses nobody living in need to be remodeled or something, or taken down or something.

But it used to not be that way. It used to be somebody living in all these houses here in Farmville. All of them. And mostly, to tell the truth about it, most of the black people owned their own homes in Farmville, when I was growing up. They owned their own home.

A few of them was rented, but um, the children and the grandchildren just didn't want them. They wanted to go other places to live, and they let them go down. They didn't remodel them or anything. I think that's the basis of what happened. But um, like I said, when I was in Connecticut, I enjoyed Connecticut, but I got tired of it after a while.

[00:12:22] **Tessa Desmond:** About Farmville, are there things you miss about North Carolina?

[00:12:26] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, yeah, I did miss, um, the, shall I say, the good times I thought I was having. Like, we had a lot of clubs and everything in Farmville, and places you could go. Always been into churches, and, um, I missed all that when I went to Connecticut.

Of course, I did, uh, matter of fact, I did join church up in Connecticut, and then I came back here. It was nice. I just got tired of the city life. It was a little too fast for me, I think.

[00:12:55] **Tessa Desmond:** So, you were talking to me about some stories of growing up in the time of segregation and living through the time of integration.

[00:13:02] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Mm hmm.

[00:13:03] **Tessa Desmond:** What stories do you want to share about that?

[00:13:06] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, back there when I was coming up, you really had to look up to the, to the white men, for everything, really, because if you wanted to, um, if you wanted to buy a car and you didn't have all the money, you could go to him, I'm just telling the truth now, and tell him that you wanted that car down at the Chevrolet place or whatever and you didn't have enough money, and he would say, you go back down there and I'll call him and tell him that you have it. And when you get back down there, the man said, uh, Mr. So and so said to let you have that car, and you would get it. I mean, it was just as simple as that then.

But of course, time changes, change, change, you know, later on. But I know that to happen because I remember one time we needed a car, and we didn't even have the money to pay for it with. But this man that owned the farm, we told him, we, we saw a car we wanted and we didn't have the money. She said, you, he said, you go down there and tell him I said, let you have it and you'll pay him when you sell your tobacco and your cotton and all that.

Cause we gonna, you know, cause every year you didn't make money. Some years you just broke off even. And some years, actually, and I keep saying to white men, I hope you don't be offended by that. But, um, they would figure, so you wouldn't make anything. You know, that,

you know, really. And, if you, um, I tried to talk to him about that. He might tell you, you have to move off his farm.

So you had to go somewhere else and find somewhere else to, to farm. So it'd be better off if you say nothing, if you want to, you know, keep farming on that farm, you know, whatever. That part was bad. That wasn't, it wasn't so good, but you could get what you wanted. I mean, and you pay for it later, because like one year you might, he might take your money and the next year he'll let you make a whole bunch of money. So it's up to you to save some of it, or go and spend it all.

Now a lot of farmers, um, bought a lot of houses, homes, uh, that they'd rent out later on. Two or three, or four or five homes while they were working on the farm. But we didn't, we didn't get but one, thank God.

[00:15:21] **Tessa Desmond:** And what if they said you couldn't buy the car?

[00:15:25] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Oh, well, no such thing as can't, if you were living on his farm, he wouldn't, he wouldn't say that.

[00:15:32] **Tessa Desmond:** He wouldn't say that.

[00:15:32] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** No, he wouldn't say that. No.

[00:15:34] **Tessa Desmond:** But it was important to have that person, that white person vouch for you if you wanted to buy something on credit.

[00:15:43] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** A house or a car. Right.

[00:15:46] **Tessa Desmond:** But that, the white person that you're talking about doesn't work for a bank.

[00:15:51] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** No.

[00:15:52] **Tessa Desmond:** It's just the owner of the land that you're working on.

[00:15:55] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Right.

[00:15:55] **Tessa Desmond:** That you're living and working on.

[00:15:56] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yep. But we thought it was good days, but we look back and, and then we, we see that it should have been better. Should have been better.

[00:16:09] **Tessa Desmond:** And what was it like for black families who owned the farms? Was it different?

[00:16:16] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Yeah, there was a few people, few black people owned their own farm and everything. And they, they, they came out real good. Yeah, sure did.

[00:16:25] **Tessa Desmond:** Was, do you remember, do you have a sense if it was more black farmers were renting than owning?

[00:16:33] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Mmm, no, I, I think, yeah, more, more, more, more black people was renting.

[00:16:39] **Tessa Desmond:** How many farmers were black? How many farmers were white in the Farmville area?

[00:16:45] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** It was more blacks than whites. That was farmers.

[00:16:49] **Tessa Desmond:** And what do you think it's like now?

[00:16:51] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Now it's more whites than black. And you know why? Because there's money. There's more money out there, in big time farmers, especially.

A lot of them have two or three hundred acres of tobacco. Back then, we didn't have no two or three hundred acres of tobacco. But now, they do. They just make, get a new tractor every year if they want it. And a new house, they want whatever they want. You know, whatever. They got all kinds of cars and trucks.

So actually, really, the white man still got the money. Got more money than blacks, if you want to know the truth. Yeah, the truth will set you free.

[00:17:29] **Tessa Desmond:** What were memories that you have from the period of integration?

[00:17:33] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, things, since our integration, things have gotten a lot better for the schools and all.

More freedom, yes, because my wife, she was the first black to go up to the white school. And, um, they wanted her to go because they said she was the best teacher, black teachers they had, and they wanted the best for the white children. They told her that, right, right in, right to her face. So she went on up, she didn't want to go, but she went on up there.

And it used to be, um, Farmville, what, what was it, the one they tore down, white school. Oh, Farmville High School. Farmville High School, she went up there before they tore it down. Same place the courthouse is now. And she tore it down. Just a few years later, they started to build them out there on it, where they are now.

But um, they wanted the best for their, their kids. So that put the black kids, the white kids, sort of ahead. of the Blacks. As a matter of fact, when, uh, at one time, they would let the white people use the new books for two or three years, then they would take them and send them down to the Black school.

You know? And, uh, we knew what they was doing, but there wasn't anything we could do about it. And at that time, they didn't have many, uh, Black principals. They had the HP service. It was just schools in the black section. But the rest of the principals was white, especially for the white kids. But after integration, then, after a while, they started to, uh, making black principles.

First, it was assistant principle to the white principle. And then, later on, they saw that, that he had the brain, same brain power that white men had. So then, after a while, we had black principles, just like white. And now, I mean, I'm pretty sure now it's about, about 50 50. There might be more blacks now than, than whites.

Cause the money's not there. The money's really not there with the teachers, you know. So they, so the white man would go and do, get something going for him that he can get a whole lot more money than 50 or 60 thousand dollars. When they get in from North Carolina, I think it's about 60, 000, that's about all.

[00:19:52] **Tessa Desmond:** So when you were going to school, you were going to a segregated school?

[00:19:55] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Oh yeah. I think integration started in 1970, I believe. 71? 71. And see by that time, that's one reason I left, I went on to Connecticut. I didn't know that they was going to really integrate the schools. But it made it a lot better when they first, not when they first, but you know, gradually, things got better.

But the Blacks have been through a whole lot. In other words, we have overcome, hopefully, almost. We're still not there. We're still not there. But if it wasn't for the love of God, then change would have never come. Would have never come.

[00:20:32] **Tessa Desmond:** So we've, we started by talking about growing up on farm, and the food that you were eating, and that your family was cooking, and then moving off the farm.

We've talked about segregation and integration and racial justice and, and, and where things are now. Can you put those two things together for us? What do you think, what role do you think that food and farming and gardens might play in continuing to make things better?

[00:21:02] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** I, I think for farming, I think we should, somehow we should make sure we got more black farmers and more black peoples in, in leadership.

You know, because, uh, we gonna need it, you know, because we all was created equal, you know, really, all made from the dust of the earth, you know. I think we all should be equal, but it's not like it should be yet, you know, we have like the, uh, uh, judges and all that now, but we used to not have that, and so we, we still have a ways to go, and I won't say a long ways to go, but we have a somewhat a ways to go to make things better and looking ahead, I don't know what the change is going to be because of the president and all the things in the White House is not where they should be so everything is all out of order right now.

Yes, hard to say what what it's gonna look like in the next, even the next 10 years or 5 years.

[00:22:10] **Tessa Desmond:** And thinking about how you were sharing when you were on the farm and you always had enough to give away. That probably felt real good.

[00:22:19] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** That felt real good, yes. And that was the way it should be. And I've noticed now that a lot of people have a giving heart. Since COVID, uh, came in, uh, about three years ago, people's just giving from their heart. I mean, just give, you don't want to see nobody hungry. But it seemed like back in, in the day, it was a little different from that. They didn't care what you ate or not.

I mean, they know you're going to eat something. But, uh, now people, regardless of what color or race you are, they are concerned about each other. Because you can see, watch TV and see that. Of course, look at Mexico, you know, they're allowing all the people to come over and all. I don't know what they're going to do about that because Donald, he didn't want, he didn't want them over here at all. So know what's going to happen there. But Biden is, is, is letting them come over.

[00:23:15] **Tessa Desmond:** Tell me about your book.

[00:23:17] **Alonzo Willoughby Jr.:** Well, it would be based on what I was just talking about. All the things that was happening when I was growing up and all. And how I came up and how I enjoyed what we did have. What we was doing, working on the farm.

Had plenty to eat and plenty of nice clothes and everything. But, uh, yeah, I would like to write a book one day.