AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER


ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with Bill Hatch, a family farmer and the owner of Zephaniah Farm Vineyard in Leesburg, Virginia. He was interviewed by folklorist Kim Stryker as part of her Archie Green Fellowship project to document Winery Workers in the state of Virginia.

The flourishing vineyards and growing winemaking industry in Virginia is a fairly recent development. During his interview, Hatch talks about how he transformed his multi-generational family beef farm into a successful winery.

INTERVIEW

Bill Hatch: We got out of dairy farming in 1986, and now I tell everybody that it was a bad business to be in. It’s a commodity. My goes with everybody else’s milk and sold it at the store for whatever the US government kind of set the support price, more or less.

And so we got out in ‘86 and we wandered in the woods for a few years trying to figure out what to do, and we took up beef cattle, but I realized that that would NOT sustain the family farm. So... I was interested in grapes and wine, but I found that wine was extremely intimidating and my family thought I was insane to even think about growing wine. And they told me that. So... in 2001, my daughter, Emily, Tremain’s older sister, was in school, and she went to a semester abroad up in Alto Adige, in Südtirol in Italy, up in the Alps.

Kim Stryker: Nice!

Bill Hatch: I had to visit her. She was living in a barn, and studying in a castle. It was a great experience for her...
Kim Stryker: Yes!

Bill Hatch: And for me to visit her. So, on a visit in March in 2001, I had a conversation on a Sunday evening with Zitzo, who was the professor of Agricultural Archeology. Yeah, and um, that was a study of how farming was carried out 1,100 years ago in the Middle Ages.

Kim Stryker: Right.

BH: And so in this conversation, we talked about grapes and wine extensively from Alta Adige. And I said, Zitzo, I would love to grow wine in Virginia, but maybe it's beyond the dairy farmer from Virginia to grow this magnificent beverage. Zitzo looked at me and said, “Bill, it's farming. Just plant the damn grapes!”

Kim Stryker: (laughing)

Bill Hatch: The light bulb went off and we planted a 1,000 vines the next year. And that was now 16 years ago!

Kim Stryker: So, you really moved on it! He told you and you got up and did it.

Bill Hatch: Oh yeah, the next year planted 1,000 vines. Spring break, I had my twin daughters, and my son and my wife and myself out digging holes - planting holes.

We had a crop in year two, it was a dairy farm. It was a field close to the barn. And the adage in the dairy business is that the manure field goes closest to the barn, because you have to haul manure every day.

So we made experimental wine for family use till 2007, and my wife said, “You're spending all your time and all your money doing that. You need to get a license.” So we did. We got a license in 2007, and that was the first vintage we produced legally, commercially. And it turned out pretty well.

Well, I grew up in a 200-year-old home, brick home in Leesburg. And we opened the tasting room in 2009 in that 200-year-old home. And... so the home was already there. It really didn't take much alteration at all. It also involved... I mean, to kind of changes that took place was that in 2009, we opened a tasting room with a BAR, which is what everybody else seemed like they were having to do was a bar. And I visited Oregon in 2009 and went to a vineyard called Stoller Vineyard. Run by Bill Stoller, who had grown up on a turkey farm, similar to dairy farming.
And we went into their winery and Bill Stoller, or--has his employees say: “Have a seat, we’re going to bring the wine to you.” So my wife and I looked at each other and said, “We need to do THIS.” We have seated tastings now, that’s kind of our signature event: seated tastings in the 200-year-old home.

Kim Stryker: And so, so what surprised you about the transition from dairy and cattle to being a wine grower?

Bill Hatch: More fun.

Kim Stryker: More fun?

Bill Hatch: Yeah, more fun. And I’m having more fun than I’ve EVER had...

Kim Stryker: Really?

Bill Hatch: It is the same land. Family farm. Originally it was 400 acres and my wife and I bought 27 acres and the 200-year-old home from my family.

I mentioned they thought I was crazy. They did not want to join me in the effort. So we are growing grapes and my brother is using all the rest of the farm for beef.

Kim Stryker: Right... so. Um, you haven’t been able to convince him that wine is the way to go?

Bill Hatch: Uh, interesting relationship... my brother, I get along pretty well, but he will very frequently say: “Wine business is different than the beef business. Wineries have a lot more income.” And yes, yes they do. A lot more expenses and a lot more income.

In Virginia, there were 56 wineries in 2000. And now there are 280 some wineries in Virginia. People ask all the time, well, is it the land? And I really have to be honest and say, no, it’s not really the land. There’s a lot of good land in North Carolina and Maryland and West Virginia. It's because in Virginia, the governors and the legislature enacted this new bill, called The Farm Winery Act in 1980 and so... the governors and legislature actually voted in funds for Virginia Tech, and that’s why we’re here today.

Kim Stryker: Right!

Bill Hatch: Because of Virginia Tech and the research they've done. The research effort and promotion effort in our neighboring states is not as good as it is in Virginia. We have saying in Loudoun County: “Homes grow very well on the soil in Loudoun County, but houses are the LAST crop that will grow.”
I think that the market in Loudoun County - a little hyperbole- is the best market in the world. When you think about the demographics and the percentage of people who drink wine. We have other areas that produce more wine, but not the demographics that support that in our county. Twenty percent of adult Americans drink wine once a week, and in the Washington area. I think that’s more like 50% of the adult population drink wine once a week.

Kim Stryker: And I would say maybe two or THREE times a week!

Bill Hatch: Very true! It’s a low bar!

Succession is very important and I’m just so happy that my family, my son and my daughter are very interested in doing this... Dairy farming is a great family business and you get to talk to your neighbors maybe once a week or maybe once a month, because there's not much interchange socially. And in the wine business, you're talking to customers every day that they come in to taste your wine. And nobody ever asked me about milk and how what vintage it was and how did you make it? Nobody ever said: “I love your milk!,” but in the wine business, people say: “I love yourwine.” That's a great reward.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): You’ve been listening to Bill Hatch, a farmer, winery worker and the owner of Zephaniah Farm Vineyard in Leesburg, Virginia, talk about his experiences in his region’s growing wine industry. He was interviewed by folklorist Kim Stryker as part of the American Folklife Center’s Occupational Folklife Project.

To hear the complete interview with Mr. Hatch as in-depth interviews with other Virginia winery owners, please visit: www.loc.gov/folklife or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project. This is folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, thank you for listening to America Works.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov