Andrew (00:00:10):

Today's episode comes to you from South Royalton, Vermont, where we visit with Geo Honigford of Hurricane Flats Farm. He's grown mixed vegetables, popcorn, and hay for 26 years. He also made the decision to sell his farm just a few years ago and pursue a different career path. I thought this was unique and wanted to chat with him about this decision to sell and pivot into a new chapter in life. We start off by learning his background and experience at the top of the episode. Then we spend a significant part of the conversation talking about popcorn as Hurricane Flats is the only farm I know growing that crop in Vermont, and I've experimented with growing it myself and curious what it takes to grow beyond the hand scale of experimentation. We wrap up the end of the episode with additional tips and takeaways reflecting on farming as a career.

(00:01:03):

Before we get started, I wanted to share a review left on Apple Podcasts. It starts off by saying, "A hidden gem. I have been listening to this show since the early days and feel lucky to have discovered it, especially with how great the format is now with the full farm tours and probing questions. I listened to multiple farm podcasts and this is the one I look forward to coming out the most every month." Wow. Thanks so much Bland Family Farm. I appreciate the comment and I'm glad you're enjoying the show. Thanks for being a long time listener. If this show has impacted you, I'd love to hear it via email or publicly as a review in the podcast app. The Farmer's Share is supported by the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association and the Ag Engineering program of the University of Vermont Extension. If you enjoy the show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting thefarmersshare.com/support. Now let's get to the show.

Geo Honigford (00:02:15):

I'm Geo Honigford, otherwise no known one as Tom. That's my correct name or my government name as my daughter would say. We're in South Royalton Vermont in my house.

Andrew (00:02:28):

So thanks for coming on the show.

Geo Honigford (00:02:29):

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Andrew (00:02:30):

It's a pleasure to meet you.

Geo Honigford (00:02:32):

As you as well. We owned 37 acres and we did about 12 acres of intensive vegetables, a lot of sweet corn, popcorn, and then we also made a lot of hay. So I think in our peak we made like 9,000 square bales a year, but by the end of my career I was down to about 4,000, 4,500. So vegetables, popcorn, hay, all organic. The hay wasn't certified organic because there's no market for it, but the other stuff was certified organic, and I did that for 28 years. Our primary markets, we sold at the Norwich Farmer's Market, which is a great market, like the best in Vermont, I think. We had a farm stand on the farm, and then I did a little bit of wholesale. As the years went on, I cut down more and more on the wholesale, and pretty much at the end I was pretty much just wholesaling popcorn, which I was always wanting to do, but I never really wanted to wholesale much anyway. That never was a goal of mine.

Andrew (00:03:38):

But the vegetables were all retail from the farmer's market and your farm stand?

Geo Honigford (00:03:42):

Yeah, at the end, almost everything. Occasionally I'd have what I call my dump market where you overproduced on something, so I'd look around for someone who I could sell it to, but it was happening less and less as my career advanced.

Andrew (00:03:57):

How did you get started farming? What made you want to get into it?

Geo Honigford (00:04:01):

I got started in West Africa. I was in the Peace Corps, and even though I was trained to be an educator, I went to school to be a teacher. The Peace Corps wisely and the three branches they have of the Peace Corps, they have educational branch, they have an ag branch and a health branch, and of course, seeing that I was an educator and being the federal government, they put me in the ag branch and they trained us in how to grow swamp rice using the rice patty systems you see in Southeast Asia, except we were just doing it in swamps. And the first of crop of rice I helped a farmer grow, it was just so cool. I would just go down and just sit sometimes and look at the rice and I just thought to myself, "I got to do this. This is so neat. I just need to do this." And so then when I came back, it was just a matter of figuring out how to get going.

Andrew (00:05:00):

So you came back from the Peace Corps with starry-eyed from watching rice. Where'd you get started? Did you just go buy a farm?

Geo Honigford (00:05:08):

No. So then one of my fellow Peace Corps volunteers had gone to Dartmouth College and had worked with a farmer who's trained many of us, Jake Guest, you probably know his name. Kilder Farm was his farm. And he had worked for Jake for several years and he said, "Jake and I get along really well. If you tell Jake you know me, you'll have a job." And so I called up Jake and said, "I'd like to learn about farming," and I said, "I know Mark Cayman," and I had a job.

Andrew (00:05:41):

A little name-drop.

Geo Honigford (00:05:44):

And then Jake was very knowledgeable, knows a ton of stuff, and so I ended up working with Jake for roughly two years, and then I ventured out on my own.

Andrew (00:05:59):

When you got started farming, did you jump in with a dozen acres or did you get started in a backyard or?

Geo Honigford (00:06:08):

No, I did not jump in with a dozen acres. So one of the things that when I took these really careful notes as I was working with Jake and talking to other farmers and doing things. And one of my notes was I kept emphasizing over and over in this little notebook is do not jump in whole hog your first year because you have to get debt then to pay for everything. And so you have to buy a tractor on debt and do this on debt and do everything on debt. And you never seem to come up above surface. So I started very slowly. I started at, I think my first year I was at one acre. I was pretty much a stay home dad for my two kids. And slowly expanded up until then, I started hiring employees and then reached the stage where I was at when I sold the farm.

(00:07:03):

It was a gradual process, but I would say I was five or six years in before I made any money because every dime I made, I poured right back into the farm. But year five I made a really good profit and I made profits every year after that. But the first four years I didn't make any money.

Andrew (00:07:22):

Just capital investment.

Geo Honigford (00:07:24):

I just invested everything I made and I had no debt except for the mortgage on the land itself. I had no debt, and when I needed to buy a tractor, I just went out and paid for it cash or a truck. I'd be saving money for it and knew what was coming.

Andrew (00:07:40):

When you got started, did you just grow as much as you could and as much as the market asked for? Or did you come up with a business plan and was strategic about where you wanted to take the farm?

Geo Honigford (00:07:53):

I was strategic. I never had a written business plan because it was just me. My business plan was in my head, but it was definitely there. No, I was very strategic, because one of the things I had seen is people overproduce and they still, I see it all the time. They overproduce and then you can't make any money on it if you overproduce. So I had said, I'm not going to overproduce. I think that the one thing, I would never claim that I'm the world's greatest grower and I know how to grow things better than other people, but I'm a pretty good business person and I knew how to make money, and so I rarely overproduced. There'd be an occasional time where you'd have too many beets because they did really well and came in better than you thought. So that always happens, but I definitely was not of the mindset, "I'm just going to plan it and see if I can sell it." That never happened with me. That was never a strategy of mine.

Andrew (00:08:52):

What did you envision the farm would be when you got started?

Geo Honigford (00:08:58):

Wow, that's an interesting question, Andrew. It was like 30 some years ago. I'm trying to think of what, I guess I envisioned what it turned out to be I think. Though, I think a lot of us, I think the one thing, it wasn't what, now that I think about it, I think I envisioned that we were going to have apple trees and we're going to have pigs, and we were going to have a couple of cows and we're going to do all that

stuff. I didn't do any of that stuff. I just concentrated in on the veg. I tried some beefers for a while and it wasn't me, and so I got rid of them. But I never did do a few of this and a few of that. Because I quickly realized there's no money in it, and if there's no money in it, then I'm not going to do it. I don't want to do it because I'm already exhausted at the end of the day-

Andrew (00:10:01):

It's one more thing.

Geo Honigford (00:10:02):

And my thing was always, once I have something down, I'll tackle something else. So once I felt like, oh, I got this dialed in. I know what I'm doing in this area, now I'll start making hay because I always like to make hay. Now I'm going to start growing popcorn because I thought that's a pretty cool thing to do. So as I dialed one thing and I would take something else on, but I never took it all on at once because I felt like I would get overwhelmed and swamped.

Andrew (00:10:34):

Yeah, no, that's wise advice.

Geo Honigford (00:10:36):

Maybe. It was for me.

Andrew (00:10:42):

It worked. Yeah. Do you think, you said there was no money in animals?

Geo Honigford (00:10:46):

No, I didn't. There was no money for me because at the scale I was at.

Andrew (00:10:49):

Right. The way you wanted to raise them, it wouldn't have worked.

Geo Honigford (00:10:53):

Because I wasn't going to be able to put 50 or 60 head on my land. But I am not saying there's no money in it. It just wasn't no money at my scale.

Andrew (00:11:02):

Correct. Yeah, that's what I thought. So you learned most of your farming experience from Jake over a couple of year period then.

Geo Honigford (00:11:12):

No. I've learned a lot from Jake, but I would say that I learned more from just the school of hard knocks and going to things like the NOFA conference and talking to other farmers and going to the twilight meetings and doing things like that. It's really interesting, the first bunch of years I would go to everything I could because that learning curve was so steep and you would learn in so much. And the last bunch of years you don't go to much anymore because it's like, yeah, I go there and I learn a couple

of things, but not too much. It wasn't worth my time type of thing. I still wanted to do a few things a year to make sure that I wasn't missing out because I don't have all the answers. But Jake was certainly very informative to me and was definitely someone who I'd call my mentor. But I think ultimately when you get on your own land, you have to learn your land and that's when the education starts again.

Andrew (00:12:18):

So it was mostly self-taught or peer-to-peer event?

Geo Honigford (00:12:23):

Yeah, I don't know if I'd say mostly, I don't know what the percentage would be, but a lot of it, yeah, it's peer-to-peer. I think is not self-taught, but a lot of peer-to-peer. I learned a ton of, and that's what made the Vermont farming community so special is they were so willing to share. They learned something and they present it and they share it, and that was so helpful. So when I was getting into popcorn, it's very hard to find out information about popcorn. Nobody knows anything about it in Vermont. And the only people who know about it are in the Midwest, and they all have big contracts with Orville Redenbacher and things, and you can't talk to them. They will not share information. Go look at the extension agencies. They have very little information on popcorn. They don't know much the extension people either, because the big growers don't share information.

(00:13:21):

And I ran into this, somehow tracked this guy named Bacas down in South Dakota, and he said he would teach me everything I wanted to know. I had one caveat, which is I had to share it with everybody who asked because no one would teach him, and he learned it all. And then once he learned it all on his own, he said, "You just have to share it." And so I have always shared my popcorn, the stuff I've learned. But I think it was really neat that so many of the farmers around here taught me so much. And it's the older generation, the guys like Jake and Bruce Craig and people who are starting to age out of the industry.

Andrew (00:14:05):

Yeah, they've definitely been a huge mentor. Like you said, it's a whole group of people that really helped a whole generation farm in the Northeast. And that's part of my motivation for the podcast is to capture some of those farm stories and some of that advice and share it with the next generation of growers.

Geo Honigford (00:14:25):

Yes, yeah. And I think it's awesome because the new generation needs the experience of the old generation to take off and run, and we want them to be successful, so.

Andrew (00:14:37):

Do you have a college background at all or no?

Geo Honigford (00:14:39):

Yeah, I went to Miami University, which is in Oxford, Ohio. The University of Miami is in Florida. So I went there and I thought I was going to be a school teacher and a coach. And I did a little school teaching along the way before I bought the farm, but it was always, once I left West Africa, I was going to farm. And the school teaching was just a way to make some money so I could get to farming.

Andrew (00:15:04):

Interesting. When you went to college, you didn't have a farming in mind?

Geo Honigford (00:15:10):

No, no.

Andrew (00:15:12):

That was just an opportunity that-

Geo Honigford (00:15:14):

That I ended up in West Africa and ended up in agriculture and ended up doing that-

Andrew (00:15:19):

And I like this.

Geo Honigford (00:15:20):

And then I fell in love. Yeah, no, it was even in my vision. My parents are the first generation off the farm. I have some uncles and aunts who farmed, so I was around farms, but it never occurred to me that that's what I wanted to do.

Andrew (00:15:36):

Yeah. What farms did your extended family do?

Geo Honigford (00:15:39):

Hogs, grain, dairy.

Andrew (00:15:43):

Yeah, a mix. What did you find most fulfilling in your career in farming?

Geo Honigford (00:15:48):

I think that's a tough question to answer because when you say the word most, there's a lot of mosts that come to mind. The end of the day, sitting up on the bank overlooking my farm, eating on the picnic table and looking out over the farm, and seeing that just the clean sweep of mowed fields or corn growing or vegetables, that was pretty satisfying. Especially from up there because I couldn't see all the little faults that were going on down below. Feedback from the customers, just interacting with them and how grateful they were and how happy they were to support us was definitely pretty cool. I think the other thing, it seems weird, but it encapsulates into a moment, is that cold beer after putting up 900 bales of hay, that's a pretty good beer. And I miss that beer, because I no longer put up 900 bales of hay in a day.

Andrew (00:17:13):

Yeah, that's a lot of hay. Yep. Well, I know this, but we haven't shared it on the podcast yet. You're no longer farming. Could you explain a little bit on your decision to exit farming?

Geo Honigford (00:17:26):

It's actually a lot to explain there. So if 12 years ago you could have come up to me and offered me $2 million for my farm, and the answer would've been no. My wife would've sold, But me, no way. I built this up, it was rundown place. I fixed up the house, I fixed up the barn, I got the fields productive. There's no way in hell I was going to sell this. And about three years ago, it suddenly struck me that, a combination of things happened and it suddenly struck me that I'm out for a hike with my wife one day in late May, and it's like, "I don't know if I want to keep doing this." And I realized the last five years before the farm season started, I would go into, I wouldn't call it out-and-out depression, but I would be depressed. Not like where you can't get out of bed depressed, but just not happy. And it was always at the start of the farm season. And then I started realizing I'm actually not looking forward to the start of the farm season.

(00:18:41):

And as the farm season would get going, I'd forget all about it because you get so wrapped up in it would go away. And I thought, ah, it was because the weather was bad that year or because my dad died or whatever might've happened also. I just related it to that. And then I realized that as I would get an employee who I really liked and work with them and I could really work with them, I would say, "Hey, I'm looking for a partner. I'm looking for someone who wants to buy me out." That was always my exit plan is to find somebody, train them, I fade into the sunset, they take over. And for one reason or another, it never worked out. And as they would leave the farm, I would be bummed out. I'm like, "Why am I so bummed out that they left?"

(00:19:39):

And then the other thing was, I was always buying houses in the winter, fixer uppers, the ones that you can't even live in. It took me usually two years to finish one, and I would fix up the house and then sell it when I got it done. I always was bummed out to leave the house and go out to the farm. It's like, I got to wrap up the work here in the house because I got to be farming now. And I'll be always like, "I really like working on the house." And it was like, why am I doing what I don't want to do anymore? And so I used to love it, but I don't think I love it as much as I used to. I've never hated it. I never got to the point where I was dreading going out there. But I think I would have gotten to that point.

(00:20:27):

So I talked to my wife and it was like I thought about it and it's like, "I got to get out. All the signs point to get out and I don't have to do this, so I'm going to get out."

Andrew (00:20:41):

Why do you think the excitement fizzled?

Geo Honigford (00:20:49):

I think it fizzled, well, it's very tough to answer these questions, so I would say the same thing when I used to... So I taught school for a few years in between when I got out of the Peace Corps in West Africa where I fell in love with farming. I always liked teaching school, never hated teaching school. But there was something I wanted to do more than teach school, and that was to farm. And so I think the short answer is there was something I wanted to do more than farm was work on these old houses. And I think the other part is I was 60 years old and I'm completely tied down. I used to love backpacking. I hadn't backpacked since I got the farm. Never did it. No time. All this beautiful weather we have in New England, the best time of year is the summer. I can't go anywhere. I have to be within reach of the farm.

(00:21:56):

I can't do the hikes I want. I can't travel the way I want. I can't do all these things. So I was like a prisoner of the farm. And the question I asked myself, "Is there something I would rather do that I can't do because I'm farming?" And the answer was, unequivocally, yes, there is something I'd rather do. And so as soon as that came up to yes, it's like, "I'm getting out. I'm getting out." Even though I still like it, I'm getting out because there's other things I want to do and I'm 60 years old. And if I do those other things until I'm 80, well then guess what? I can't climb Kilimanjaro. I can't hike the long trail. I can't do those things anymore because I can no longer farm so hence I can't hike anymore either. And I want to do those things while I still can. Life's short.

Andrew (00:22:47):

That's a valid reason.

Geo Honigford (00:22:49):

I can farm myself to death or I can get out while I'm still a young man and do other things. So I decided to leave.

Andrew (00:23:03):

No, that's great that you had the realization that there's other things that you want to do and you should do it while you can. And in a way, you did farming, you got to do what you wanted to do with it. You built it up into what you wanted it to be, and you're ready for something different.

Geo Honigford (00:23:21):

Yeah. And it helped that when we sold it, we had a lot of young families who were interested. My kids were not interested in farming, so that wasn't going to be an option to sell to them. And we could've stayed there and let the farm disappear and then rented the land. But that wasn't an option to me. So we had to go. And I loved the place, but we had to go because I wanted to see it stay a farm.

(00:23:57):

And the hardest thing to give up when you stop farming is farming is probably like being a police officer or a fireman or a soldier. Not many other jobs where you are a farmer. Because you think, sleep, eat, farming, that's all you do, especially during the season. Your mind never leaves it for very long. You can't leave it for very long. You're always there. It's all consuming and it will all consume you. And people get so wrapped up in their identity as a farmer, they don't realize they're not happy farming anymore. I can point out a bunch of people who are farming and are miserable. They hate it, but they can't redefine themselves. They don't know how to redefine themselves. They're a farmer. It's a funny thing in Vermont when you look at professions in town, and even though farming's not a high paid profession, it's a highly valued profession in Vermont. So if you're a farmer in a Vermont town, you're a rockstar. And I was giving up that rockstar status, and that was hard to do actually. I struggled with that and still have a little bit of a struggle with that. Because up until recently, people would say, " What do you do for a living?" If I'm meeting somebody new, I'd say, "I used to farm, but now I'm doing this." And I thought, wow.

Andrew (00:25:37):

When is that not your identity?

Geo Honigford (00:25:38):

Yeah. So it's like, I better stop that I got to-

Andrew (00:25:41):

But they knew you as the farmer in town.

Geo Honigford (00:25:43):

Well, I'm talking about people who just meet me for the first time. I'm still because I want that rockstar status that I used to have. I think a lot of farmers just don't, they put their head down. As somebody said, "Farmers are very good at taking care of their farm, but not as good about taking care of themselves." So I think a lot of times they just put their head down and they get the work done, and they don't come up for air enough to know that you only got one shot at life and is that what you want to do your whole life? And it almost sounds like I'm making an ad for please don't ever farm. That's not the case. I loved what I did for 26 years and can't imagine another lifestyle. But that was enough.

Andrew (00:26:41):

That's a good run. That's a lot of time. It's not like you just dabbled in it for three, five years. You spent a career length mastering the craft.

Geo Honigford (00:26:53):

Yeah. I don't know if I ever mastered it. I never mastered it-

Andrew (00:26:58):

I'd say you sold a business that was profitable 30 years later. I'd say that's a certain level of mastery.

Geo Honigford (00:27:05):

Yeah, I guess you certainly look at it that way. Yeah.

Andrew (00:27:11):

Did your wife or kids have any significant impact on the decision for a career change?

Geo Honigford (00:27:20):

No. No, my wife was never part of the farm in the sense of going out and working. Occasionally I'd run decisions off her, but she made it clear when we started that this was my gig, not hers. Which I think was also very helpful in terms of profitability because I had somebody working off farm, making healthcare happy. That's just huge. And the kids, I never consulted them until I said I'm selling the farm. Because I thought it would just be confusing if they said, " Oh, it'd be a shame. We grew up in that house and we really like it and don't sell the house." And I didn't want that conflicted thing. They weren't going to farm. It was more important to sell the farm that to keep living in the house. And I didn't want that conflict, so I didn't tell them until I said, "We got in the market and we're going to sell it."

Andrew (00:28:22):

Did they grow up on the farm?

Geo Honigford (00:28:24):

Yeah. Yeah. They both grew up there. That's the only place they ever lived.

Andrew (00:28:29):

There's a lot of young farmers now who are expanding their family or thinking about having kids. What was your experience like having kids on the farm?

Geo Honigford (00:28:39):

Awesome. Except for the fact that I couldn't travel with them during the farm season as much as I'd like to. We couldn't go on those big family trips out west or anything like that, which is a real sacrifice actually. But just the freedom of having them grow up on the farm. And only 2% of Americans farm, so only 2% of American kids are growing up on a farm. They got to be part of that 2%. So I think it was pretty special to have them grow up on a farm.

Andrew (00:29:11):

Rockstar status.

Geo Honigford (00:29:13):

There you go.

Andrew (00:29:15):

You're right. So not many people get to do that. Tell me about a time when you felt really successful farming.

Geo Honigford (00:29:23):

I think probably after that fifth year when I had invested in everything, I had paid for the tractor, I had paid for the greenhouses, I paid for everything cash. And that first year, it's like I actually had to write Uncle Sam a check at the end of the year for income earned. I think that was the first like, "Hey, this is successful." And it might be a different viewpoint than other farms because I think a lot of other farms don't judge success based on profit. But sustainability begins because everybody wants to be sustainable. Sustainability begins with the letter P for profit. If you can't make money, you're not sustainable. I don't care how noble you are. I don't care what goals you have. I don't care how much food you give away. If you can't make money and your farm goes under, you're not sustainable. Your model doesn't work. And so you need a model that works. And so to me, that was based on can I make money? And I think that's the year I said, "I could make money." And I made money every year after that. I never didn't actually even...

(00:30:37):

And Irene, when we got flooded out on August 29th, we still made money that year. Not much. We were barely profitable that year. It didn't make much money. But nobility, there's no nobility in starving and not having money to meet your basic needs in life. There's no nobility in that. And I don't think if you're a farmer and you're barely getting by and working your tail off and just can't get above ground and just you're stressed about money all the time, it's not worth it. Life's too short. Don't do this to yourself. Find something else to do. You'll be happy doing something else. You just need to identify what it is and go there. Because if you make money, it's even better. And we always sold stuff. You can ask my competitors at the Norwich Farmer's Market, we sold stuff for lower than anybody else ever did. I

always had the lowest prices because that was so you don't have to gouge people to make money. Like I said, I think the one skill I have is I'm good with money.

Andrew (00:31:55):

Were you intentionally undercutting or you knew what was profitable so-

Geo Honigford (00:31:59):

I know my profit margins. I know how much it cost me to grow stuff. People don't know-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:32:04]

Andrew (00:32:00):

So you [inaudible 00:32:00].

Geo Honigford (00:32:00):

My profit margins. I know how much it cost me to grow stuff. People don't know. You can walk around the state and ask people, "How much does it grow to cost you to grow a pound of tomatoes?" They don't know. I knew, I knew how much. Not to the penny, but I could just sit there and do the math and it's like, I know how much it cost me to grow it. So I know that I can sell a pound of tomatoes for $2.75 cents and still make 50 cents a pound, and that pays for my employees. That pays for me. It pays for an hourly rate for me, and that 50 cents a pound is just literally my profit on top, and I knew that. And so how can you compete with someone who knows where their margins are? And so if somebody else in the market starts growing, starts selling tomatoes for $2.75, I can go down to $2.50. I'm still making a quarter pound.

Andrew (00:32:57):

Because you knew that.

Geo Honigford (00:32:58):

I can do that. I can go lower. I'm good because I still want people to come to me first. And so I had that ability to do that.

Andrew (00:33:07):

Where did you learn the business sense? You mentioned a couple of times that that was a strength of yours.

Geo Honigford (00:33:15):

Yeah. Because a cheap person.

Andrew (00:33:20):

You wanted it to work.

Geo Honigford (00:33:23):

I think probably kind of watching my dad and mom really, they grew up with nothing. And I mean, they literally had nothing and in the end, they weren't rich, but they were comfortable. And as kids, we did without, and the first time I went to a sit-down restaurant, I was a senior in high school, so the first time I went to a restaurant where someone came and took my order. Never been to one before. So I just think watching how they manage their money, I think.

Andrew (00:34:04):

Very carefully.

Geo Honigford (00:34:05):

Yeah. I don't think I read a couple of books on how to run a small business type of thing. I think some people are just born with innate abilities in certain areas.

Andrew (00:34:20):

Pay attention to certain things.

Geo Honigford (00:34:22):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Andrew (00:34:27):

If you could tell me about a time when you felt really challenged by farming.

Geo Honigford (00:34:32):

I think it was more towards the end of my career, and I think that was another sign. There was a bunch of signs that came in to tell me, but especially in the vegetable world, there's more diseases coming in, there's more pests coming in. There's more new stuff to learn, and I think I was always interested in that when I was younger, but I said I got older. I think I just wanted to coast and I don't think I wanted that anymore. And so some of this stuff would really impact me hard. I always did really well with potatoes. Didn't have much trouble growing them. They sell really well at the market. I'd have six different varieties. At any given Norwich farmer's market in the fall, we could sell four or 500 pounds of potatoes. So my last year growing, the potato bugs completely wiped this out.

(00:35:36):

They had grown totally resistant to the spinosad I was using. I couldn't get the bacteria, they used to be called M1 way back in the old days, but Trident, I think they were calling it at the end. They had pulled it off the shelf because there was some kind of issue with it and it was too late. And by the time I realized Spinosa literally wasn't working for me, they munched those potatoes right down to nothing and it was a complete and utter failure, and I felt really bad at that year. I had no potatoes at the market zero and I had potato bugs you'd never seen before. I mean, they were by the gazillions out there. I think that helped to show me that, yeah, I don't want to do this anymore.

Andrew (00:36:39):

It wasn't fun anymore.

Geo Honigford (00:36:40):

I thought I had this dialed in and here I am 26 years in and this is the worst year I've ever had for potatoes, bar none, by far. And it's like, "Wow. So I'm getting worse?"

Andrew (00:36:54):

"What the heck?"

Geo Honigford (00:36:56):

"I'm not getting better at this. I'm getting worse at this." The weather's more challenging and there's no farmer out there that's going to tell you it's not more challenging. Even the guys who vote for Trump are going to tell you the weather's more challenging. I just didn't want those challenges anymore. So I think the last years, all that stuff kind of piled up, and as I'd get a new insect coming to visit me, I'd be like, "Really?" I love growing broccoli and now swede midges visiting me and I can't really grow much broccoli through the season. It's very hard and something always my customers could always depend on me to have was now inconsistent.

Andrew (00:37:39):

You mentioned, it sounds like you think that farming was getting significantly harder 30 years later than when you started. Is that true?

Geo Honigford (00:37:51):

Yeah, I do think that's true. The folks that bought the farm, I almost feel a little guilty. It's like, "Really, guys, you're going to get into farming now and all these challenges are coming up?" But that's probably just the old man in me coming out because really probably what they're looking at it is they love the challenge. That's why they're doing it. And so I probably would have been exactly the same as them.

Andrew (00:38:26):

Right. This is their beginning.

Geo Honigford (00:38:28):

This is their beginning. This is all new for them. It's all fresh. They're up for the challenge. They can handle this, they want to do this. I would've been the same way, I think. But after 26 years, it's like, no, I just want to coast it out and I can't coast it out, so I'll just move on to something else that I enjoy doing.

Andrew (00:38:49):

You mentioned the Irene flood, and that was almost zeroed out your season. Was there anything you could do to recover or get anything back after that?

Geo Honigford (00:39:00):

No. That was August 29th or something like that that happened. No, and you can't, I forget all the time periods now, but I think you can't replant anything for 60 days or something like that. It's some time figure, but whatever the time figure is, we didn't have enough time. We literally couldn't replant lettuce or do anything. So my season, I was done. We tilled everything in, put cover crops on, cleaned up the land, and then I just started picking up jobs wherever I could find them.

Andrew (00:39:38):

Did that flood all of your fields or did you have a little bit that was...

Geo Honigford (00:39:43):

We had 35 acres on a farm, thirty-seven acres on a farm, 35 are underwater. The house and barn were fine. They're high and dry. The old timers put it up high and dry, but everything else was underwater. I lost everything. Every crop I had was gone, so.

Andrew (00:40:01):

At least the house was high.

Geo Honigford (00:40:02):

I had the house, which was a big savior over my neighbors who didn't even have... They had houses who were wrecks, so I just lost my vegetables. They lost their house. So I felt, in perspective, I'm doing okay.

Andrew (00:40:18):

Right. Could have been way worse.

Geo Honigford (00:40:19):

Way worse.

Andrew (00:40:21):

Yeah. If you were just starting out now, what advice would you give to a beginning farmer?

Geo Honigford (00:40:29):

I think some of it I've already given; go slow. It's okay to have a part-time job until you work your way out of the part-time job. If you and your partner both want to farm, it's okay for one of you to work off the farm until you're ready for both of you to work on the farm. You don't have to have it all at once. Maybe it'll take you four years to get there, three years to get there, but you're much better starting off as a profitable operation. Don't overgrow. Make sure you have, you're pretty sure what your markets are before you plant the seed. If you don't, don't plant and hope. That's not a good strategy.

(00:41:19):

Know when to buy stuff. It was so easy to get seduced by equipment. You go to the shows and you see that Lilliston Cultivator and you go, "Oh my God, the things I can do with that. Oh, it'd be fantastic to have one of those." And I really always thought that, but the price of it at my scale, there's no payback on that. It really doesn't make any sense to buy a, I don't even know what they go for now, a 12 or 14,000, $15,000 cultivator. At my scale didn't make any sense. I could pick up a whole lot of smaller cultivators for next to nothing, a thousand bucks, $500 that actually did the same thing, just not quite as well. And so don't get seduced by that stuff. And I've also seen other farmers do the opposite where they don't invest and they're doing everything by hand. It's like, "Are you kidding me? You're picking off potato bugs by hand? Spray, get a backpack sprayer. Spray. There's organic stuff you can spray. Do it." You can't make any money if you're going to pick them off by hand. It makes no sense.

(00:42:43):

Yeah, that kind of stuff. I think you can make money wholesale and I think you make money, direct marketing. I think there's a lot of ways to make money, but you can't make any money if you

overproduce. You can't make any money if you shoot too high your first years. You can't make any money if you don't have the right equipment.

Andrew (00:43:04):

Is all that advice the same advice you would've told yourself getting started? Are those lessons you learned along the way?

Geo Honigford (00:43:14):

No, I think I knew that going in. That's the stuff when I was working my way up, working with Jake and observing other farms, going to twilight meetings, watching what they were doing, watching, talking to other farms, I realized my little notebook's full of where people were screwing up more than where people were succeeding. It's like, "Don't do this, don't do this, don't do that. I saw that. Don't do that." Jake's a brilliant grower, and I don't know anybody who knows more about growing than Jake does, but my notebook's kind of full of like, "Oh, saw this on the farm today. Make sure I don't do that." And it wasn't so much about growing. It was more the business sides of things. I think just intuitively, that's how you make money.

Andrew (00:44:09):

Here's an interesting take. If you could restart now, knowing what you know now, what do you think you might do differently?

Geo Honigford (00:44:18):

Certainly got to farm again, no doubt about it. I would definitely lock up twenty-six years farming again. I would be the popcorn king. I wouldn't bother with anything else, just popcorn. I love growing that stuff. It's a great product. If you get the right varieties, easy to market. Yeah. The problem is you need a rotation. So I wouldn't be just the popcorn guy. I'd probably have to have soybeans in there and maybe some wheat in there. So, make, go on a three-year rotation. But I think I'd be on that and I'd be, I think that's where I would've gone.

Andrew (00:45:07):

The popcorn king.

Geo Honigford (00:45:09):

Yeah, yeah. So I would definitely be into soybeans and wheat as well. But those being the lesser of the crops, if I can break even on them while I'm waiting for the popcorn to make me my money.

Andrew (00:45:21):

Why do you think you'd also do those aside from rotation?

Geo Honigford (00:45:26):

Just rotation. If I could do popcorn every year in the same spot.

Andrew (00:45:30):

Just as a cover crop.

Geo Honigford (00:45:31):

Yeah, yeah, I would do it. But yeah, just as a cover crop, the beans are pretty important, like a soybean because it can put in the nitrogen the year before you plant the corn.

Andrew (00:45:42):

So would you harvest those or just-

Geo Honigford (00:45:44):

Oh, no, I would definitely harvest them. Yeah. I never did it, but I was getting... I read a lot about it and thought, "This is my next stage if I go there," and realized when I got to that stage, I was like 55. And it's like, "No, I'm not going there. I'm not going to invest in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment," because that's what it would cost, "at my age." I'm not going to do it. Then I know I'm forcing myself to farm until I'm 75.

Andrew (00:46:15):

Yeah, you're committing yourself at that point.

Geo Honigford (00:46:17):

Now I don't want to do that, but if I was younger, I would definitely have gone there.

Andrew (00:46:27):

What made you get into popcorn to begin with?

Geo Honigford (00:46:33):

I was at my first year in the Norwich farmer's market. I asked the market manager, I said, "What are people not growing here that you think might sell that people ask about?" And he said popcorn.

(00:46:48):

And I was like, why not? So then I just dabbled in it and I just grew small plots of popcorn and I'd hand harvest, hand shell, hand everything. And I kind of honed in on a couple of varieties that are better tasting than other varieties. And then I ended up with a surplus every year. I'd have too much popcorn for me to eat, and so at the first start of the market season, I'd bring in my 80 pounds of surplus popcorn and people would buy it, and then the next year people would come and they would buy 15 pounds of it. Not a pound, because they knew this was the only shot they had at the app, only bite they had. So they would buy as much as they could. And then I'm like, "Oh..." And I'd be sold out the first day of my 80 pounds. It's like, "Oh, I can do something with this." So then I started ramping up to an acre and got more mechanized, then two, than three. I think I was five acres when I stopped. That's like 15,000 pounds.

Andrew (00:47:57):

Yeah. That's a lot of popcorn.

Geo Honigford (00:47:59):

Yeah, yeah.

Andrew (00:48:01):

I always think about this, the 40 times expansion rate. So think about how much popcorn that would equate to.

Geo Honigford (00:48:02):

If it was popped.

Andrew (00:48:02):

Yeah, if it was popped.

Geo Honigford (00:48:09):

A lot harder to store it when it's popped.

Andrew (00:48:15):

I dabbled with popcorn this year. We grew about a quarter acre, got three gator loads, ended up being about a 50 hit, five gallon drum full. So we're about ready to bring that to market this year. We have a little farm store, and so I'm looking forward to seeing the customers, but I just made a quick post on social media and I already had three people, like, "Let me know when that's available." They want it, so that's exciting and it's a lot of fun to grow it, and so I'm looking forward to figuring that out

Geo Honigford (00:48:47):

Yeah, yeah. No, it's a great crop. I would encourage you to stay at it. And it was pretty cool. I'd go down to the barn and this time of year, well, not so much. I wouldn't have everything dried off, but by March everything would be dried off, and then I'd put it into big barrels and each barrel would hold about 800 pounds. And so I'd go down there and there'd be $30,000 worth of popcorn just sitting in my barn in barrels. And ultimately, if I was going to go ramp up, I wouldn't use barrels. You're going to need grain bins and augers and all that kind of stuff. That was the next step. Again, I decided not to go there, but I did the research and thought about it hard, but it's a great product and it sits there for... That longest I stored some as I just stuck some on a bag in my shelf in my office for years, and every year I'd pull it out and pop it, and every year it had a hundred percent pop and tasted great. So five years, a hundred percent pop tasted great. It's like that's a good product to grow. It doesn't go bad.

Andrew (00:49:59):

Right. Unlike lettuce.

Geo Honigford (00:50:01):

Lettuce doesn't quite have a five-year shelf life.

Andrew (00:50:06):

Were you checking moisture on that or just pop testing?

Geo Honigford (00:50:10):

Critical, critical. If you're going to get serious, get a moisture tester. Do not do a pop test. And the reason why is popcorn will do a great... It'll pop at about 15% moisture content. It'll pop great. It will mold in

storage at 15%. If you don't get down below, say, 14.3, 14.2, it's going to mold on you. So you'll sell a product that you think is good to the customer because it popped for you. But when they have it in their jar for a month and they pull it out, it's all dusty with mold. That's your fault, not theirs. And so the only way you can truly test it is to do a moisture test. And the cheaper versions of those go for, they used to go for 500 bucks. They probably go for more than that now. But, biggest addition, you have to have it. You can't not have a moisture tester.

Andrew (00:51:15):

I was able to pick one up for 275 this fall.

Geo Honigford (00:51:17):

Should have bought it. Did you buy it?

Andrew (00:51:18):

Yeah. Yeah, I got it. Yep.

Geo Honigford (00:51:20):

Great. Great. [inaudible 00:51:21].

Andrew (00:51:21):

Yeah, we're testing it blank. So I did it, I dried ours. We hand husked it all and then we, yeah, three gator loads, a couple of evenings. Mom and my wife helped out, and we have this kind of a DIY herb dryer. It's a homesteader potato rack that I put sides on it. And then I used a box fan on top with a little heater fan above it, and I can kind of set that at low and it will blow warm air across it, and that would be about three bulb crates worth at a time. So I spent a couple weeks of electricity burning that out. But I was able to test this year, the moisture content, and I tried to, the first batch I pulled out too soon, and that ended up molding on me. So I lost probably 20 pounds that way, which was a bummer. But then I had some that got down to nine and a half, 10%, but then it's been popping phenomenally and most of it is like 10.8, almost 11% right now.

Geo Honigford (00:52:27):

So it shouldn't pop at nine. There's something wrong there because it won't pop below 12.

Andrew (00:52:36):

Interesting.

Geo Honigford (00:52:36):

So-

Andrew (00:52:38):

Maybe my little meter is not calibrated quite right.

Geo Honigford (00:52:40):

That's exactly right. So is it a dicky thing? Do you remember what it is, the brand it is? Is it little hand-held one?

Andrew (00:52:48):

It's a hand-held one. It's got a blue screen on it.

Geo Honigford (00:52:51):

But you should get it-

Andrew (00:52:53):

There is different settings. It'll do seventy-five different grains. So I've just been doing its yellow popcorn setting and maybe it would do better on a white popcorn setting.

Geo Honigford (00:53:02):

Well, what I ended up doing is sending my thing to the company that built it with some of my popcorn and they calibrated it to my popcorn.

Andrew (00:53:13):

Oh, nice. I have the Agratronics MT Pro Plus.

Geo Honigford (00:53:17):

Yeah, I don't know much about that. Yeah, yep. So I think if you're going to get serious, I think that's a snapshot. What you've got with it. It also could be various other things. So again, there's no one to ask about these things, but what I've come up with is, so if you dry popcorn and you get it, use the crib it, the old-fashioned way, I stick it in the corn crib and that would work, but it would take all winter to dry it. And then first thing in the spring, the popcorn's ready to shell when I got tons of other work to do. And I just don't have time for that, especially because my sheller was just, my first sheller was a hand-crank one. My second sheller was a bigger hand-crank one. My third sheller was you had to feed it one at a time, but it had a motor on it. And then I got a sheller where you could feed like five ears a second into it much better.

(00:54:27):

I like that one a lot better, but if you're feeding an ear at a time, it takes a while to do all those ears they got to handle each ear, so this is still not effective system.

(00:54:37):

But one of the things I learned about drying it, this was really interesting to me, is it would be right where you wanted it, right at 13.5, that's like the optimum, right? Because it's right in between 12 where it won't pop and 15 where it will pop, but mold, so it's like 13.5, that's the target range, but any 14.2, down to 12 five. Good. And you wouldn't get done, and the next day it would rain, it would immediately shoot up to 16, 17%, but almost immediately drop right back down to 13.5. So I think where if it was 16% earlier in the year, what I think what's happening is it's a surface moisture. When you have it dried where you want it, the inside still doesn't get wet. The moisture isn't penetrating in. But on the outside, those wet days, the humid days are making that moisture penetrate in. So it's reading high, but it's easy to dry it out because it's just surface stuff. That was my theory.

Andrew (00:55:42):

No, that makes sense.

Geo Honigford (00:55:43):

That's why I said it's an [inaudible 00:55:46].

Andrew (00:55:45):

That was on the cob at that point?

Geo Honigford (00:55:47):

It's on the cob.

Andrew (00:55:48):

In your crib.

Geo Honigford (00:55:49):

On the cob, if you take it off the cob. So if you say you run it through a corn picker and it's shells corn picker shell, right? You'll break when it's in Vermont, we're going to pick it off at, you'd be lucky to be at twenty-one twenty-two percent moisture content really high. My moisture reader wouldn't even read it. It's too high. It's off the scale. And so if you picked it at that kind of moisture content here and sent it through a combine, which has the sheller in it, you're going to crack about 15% of your kernels. And what the big boys do out in the Midwest is they send them through optical scanners and they take those out. They're also picking at about 15% moisture content out there. So they got it's hotter year, corn ripens quicker. It dries more in the field. We don't have those advantages. And so if you don't, shell, if you take it off the cob, you're going to have crack kernels. And if you're selling somebody popcorn in only eighty-seven percent of it pops. It's got crack kernels. You got, right. So what you want to do is you want to keep it on the cob until it's dry.

Andrew (00:57:08):

Yeah. Then it shells a lot easier.

Geo Honigford (00:57:09):

Then your loss rate from shelling is negligible. I mean, I would say I had a ninety-seven percent pop rate. I never actually measured it, but it was pretty high.

Andrew (00:57:26):

You'd do a bowl and there's only a couple on the bottom. That's pretty good.

Geo Honigford (00:57:28):

Yeah. Yep, yep. There's always a few maids out there.

(00:57:35):

So it is all about that. All about the, I also learned it's not about heat, it's about air and the days you're trying to pump air through. So if you're trying to pump air through your popcorn and the relative humidities... Oh crap, Ashley's got this chart who I sold the farm to, you're going to want this chart. I

don't think I even have it anymore. But it compares the relative humidity of the air, the temperature and your moisture content of your popcorn, how low can you get it. So if you've got a certain day and the relative humidity is pretty high and the air is pretty cold, you can't dry below 14%, no matter how much you pump air through there, it's just going to keep reabsorbing. And so those three things are really key. So if you've got a day where the relative humidity is pretty low, and even if the temperature's low, you might be able to dry it down to 12% that day.

(00:58:45):

So now if you had air, you don't need heat, you just need air. How much air can you pump through that? So I got a grain drying fan, and that was a game-changer when I could, I mean, it's your typical household fans blowing, I don't know, five cubic air, feet of air a second, and this thing blows 150,000 cubic feet. It's a minute on the five cubic feet and a minute on a household fan, it's 150,000 cubic feet a minute it would take, if I turned the heater on with this system, it would take 10 degree air, warm it up to 110 degrees up, and the heater would have to turn off. You don't want to heat above 110 because it cracks kernels and just like 10 degree air. It's heating it that fast that the heater has to shut off because it's now too hot because the system...

Andrew (00:59:48):

There's a lot of BTUs in that heater.

Geo Honigford (00:59:48):

Lot of BTUs.

Andrew (00:59:50):

Had a propane unit?

Geo Honigford (00:59:51):

Propane. If I kept it running around the clock, it burned 300 gallons in 24 hours. But what I learned is I didn't have to turn it on at all. If I just picked my days.

Andrew (01:00:04):

Interesting.

Geo Honigford (01:00:05):

I'd just watch my days and say, "Oh, here's a relatively low day coming up." I didn't really care what the ambient temperature of the air was. I'm just looking at humidity levels in the air. And then I'd let her rip and let her run all day. And I could actually do it just on ambient temperature. I'd learned how to do it, but it's all about air, the more air I had. When I was using smaller fans, it just didn't have... You could do the same. Took you so long to do it. And when I had that kind of air blowing through it, it was like crazy how fast it would dry.

Andrew (01:00:42):

Did you have a way of monitoring moisture content as that was on so you didn't over dry it or were you pulling samples?

Geo Honigford (01:00:50):

Pulling samples, yeah. So I built a bin that was eight feet... It was about 10 feet high, 27 feet long, four feet wide, and that would be entirely full of popcorn. I put a grain drying floor on, so it's a slatted floor so the kernels can't fall through the floor, but air can get pushed up through. So the air comes up from down below from the fan. And the other thing now you have to keep in mind is the bottom corn is going to be really dry. The top corn is going to be a little less dry and, I'm sorry, the middle corn's going to be a little less dry and the top corn's going to be...

(01:01:45):

Right? It's too dry. The middle corn's going to be at 13.5, the top corn's going to be at 15.5. So they're two points apart each. That's when I shut the whole system down and I close off all the air and I let it sit for two weeks and it equalizes itself. It shares its moisture content. So then you get back in there, the bottom stuff's 13.5, the middle's 13.5, the top is 13.5. Good to go, shell it, go. And what I used to do is I had this whole system where it would come off and then I'd have to keep moisture testing it as I was shelling. And then I would mix it in barrels and do the same process with the shelled popcorn. It'll-

Andrew (01:02:31):

To try to equalize it.

Geo Honigford (01:02:32):

It will equalize itself, but it is so much easier if you already equalized it in the bin and then you can just go to shelling and just go let it rip. Especially if we had conveyor taking it out of the bin, putting it through the sheller, and you're doing literally five ears a second, so you don't want anything to slow that process down. You're kind of cruising.

Andrew (01:02:56):

Yeah. At that

Geo Honigford (01:02:57):

Rate, yeah. It takes you like three to five minutes to fill up a 400 gallon barrel. I mean a 400, 800 pound barrel. So that's how fast it's coming down the chute. So it's kind of cool.

Andrew (01:03:10):

Did you have a way to fix popcorn that was overdried or you always had some that was 15 that you could blend with?

Geo Honigford (01:03:22):

Yeah, overdrying, you're never going to get that right. If you can blend it seems to work really well. If everything's overdried and you try to add moisture back, it's really tough because what ends up... Unless you're going to be right on top of it, and so you pour a little moisture in the top, that moisture ends up in the bottom. You got to constantly be moving it around, otherwise it molds in the bottom and then it still won't get the pop. It'll never come back to the pop it should. So I learned not to overdry, just don't do that.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [01:04:04]

Geo Honigford (01:04:00):

Just don't do that. Underdry, you can't do that either.

Andrew (01:04:07):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:04:07):

But underdry, at least I know when I'm testing it's like, "Okay, that's underdry. I just got to run it. I thought I was going to be done today, but I'm not. I got to do it again tomorrow or whatever," or sometimes I'd come home and the weather forecast fricking wasn't right. You'd come home and it's raining. It's like, "God, they said it was going to be good weather." So all I'm doing is pumping moisture in at that point, so I run right out there and shut the whole system down.

Andrew (01:04:36):

But you weren't worried about mold? I would think as soon as you get it harvested, you would want to get it dried down as soon as possible.

Geo Honigford (01:04:45):

So in the Midwest, any literature you get on popcorn all comes out of the Midwest, and so the Midwest is much warmer than we are in the winter. We're becoming more like the Midwest. So I grew up out in Ohio, and a typical winter out in Ohio is it can get wicked cold and get down to 15 below. Then it'll snow and then it'll warm up in the 40s for a week, and then it'll go back down to 20s. Then it'll be back up in the 40s, and it'll just do that all winter. Anytime you get above freezing, the mold clock starts. So it's like a degree day thing for insects or diseases, it needs so many degree days to do it, mold's the same way.

(01:05:34):

It needs so many degree days. So we tend to drop below freezing and tend to stay there for most of the winter. We have a couple of days here and there that pops up above. So the first bunch of years I was terribly worried about mold 'cause I've had so much popcorn that I'd pick it in the hopper wagons, and I'd have a whole hopper wagon full of corn. It'd have 12, 2500, 3000 pounds of popcorn sitting in this hopper wagon and that I couldn't get it into my drying system because my drying system was too small to handle that so it's in storage in my wagon.

(01:06:17):

At first, I was really worried about it molding, so I bought the screw fans. They have long screw things on them that you can screw them in and it will suck air out. I thought, "Oh, just keep some air movement in and that'll keep it from molding." Well, I've eventually learned I don't need to do anything. It's too cold. It's not going to mold in Vermont. It's not going to mold until you get back into the March season, and now your clock's ticking again because now you're into March and April. It's not cold anymore. It's going to start molding if you haven't reached the right moisture content. So now you need to really get your active gear 'cause the time is of the essence.

Andrew (01:06:59):

So that was husked in a wagon.

Geo Honigford (01:07:02):

Yeah, and it's only parsley husk 'cause I had a corn picker. The corn picker is designed, it was to do dent corn, which is a fatter ear. It's not designed to do popcorn. So when it goes through the husking bed

where it pulls the husk off, it's probably only 80% effective on getting those off. So that's another lesson learned. It's like the first year it's like, "Oh, my God, look at all these ears. They didn't husk. Oh, this is terrible." So I remember husking some and I thought [inaudible 01:07:41]. Then the next year I was like, "I'm just going to see how this does," made no difference. It didn't matter that I had 20% on husk. The cleaners, they dried just fine. I think if the whole bin would've been on husks, that might've been an issue. But with just 20% being on husk, not even an issue. Then the sheller, a lot of it blows out the sheller and then the cleaners take out the rest.

Andrew (01:08:10):

Okay, so those partial husks were still in the crib, in your drying, went right through everything.

Geo Honigford (01:08:17):

Well, the latter version of the sheller I was using has a fan in it, and so that would blow a lot of it out, but some of the husks would go through.

Andrew (01:08:30):

But you weren't hand husking the rest to clean them up?

Geo Honigford (01:08:32):

No. Stop. Yeah, because you're looking at, we could do the math, but there's hundreds and hundreds of thousands of ears of corn. I can't hand husk that it is got to be automated. There's no way you can do this if it's not automated. You just can't. It's overwhelming owning, and you're not going to make any money because you spent all day out there husking and you'll... As much as your wife loves you now, Andrew, she's not going to love you if you keep making her husk corn every year.

Andrew (01:09:05):

Yeah, no, exactly. We're at capacity.

Geo Honigford (01:09:09):

Your love's at capacity, probably your time's at capacity.

Andrew (01:09:11):

Yeah. Yeah. We're maxed. Yeah, maxed, can't do anymore with the existing equipment.

Geo Honigford (01:09:18):

Yeah. Yeah.

Andrew (01:09:19):

Great for feasibility and handpick it a couple evenings here or there with the dog on the side-by-side and it's fine, but that's not a commercial viable-

Geo Honigford (01:09:29):

No.

Andrew (01:09:29):

... sustainable-

Geo Honigford (01:09:30):

Right. If you want to go to the next level, you're just going to have to go to equipment because you're probably maxed out at what you're doing by hand.

Andrew (01:09:38):

Right. Right.

Geo Honigford (01:09:42):

I figured the level of equipment I had, I could go up to, what did I figure it was? Like 12 acres if I wanted to get that big and then I was going to outgrow my equipment. My equipment was just going to be too small to keep up with that and then I had to go to a whole nother level of equipment. You could pick up all this stuff out in the Midwest, especially 'cause they're selling these combines that for us are gigantic. For them, they're just little tiny pieces of crap. If they can get five grand for one of these, they're psyched. They're stoked. Something that they bought for $150,000, they'll get five grand for and get it out the door because the combine they're running on costs a million dollars-

Andrew (01:10:26):

Right. Right.

Geo Honigford (01:10:27):

... and it does 26 rows at a time. This thing only does 10. So you can get the stuff, it's out there. It'll do it.

Andrew (01:10:36):

Did you have a combine or-

Geo Honigford (01:10:38):

I had a corn picker.

Andrew (01:10:39):

Okay. The combine would've been the next step [inaudible 01:10:44]

Geo Honigford (01:10:43):

Yeah. Then I would've needed optical scanners and the whole nine yards. If you scan it out and you take it out, that's okay because you just sell it for grain.

Andrew (01:10:55):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:10:55):

You just shell it, they crack it and then sell it for grain. So it's a byproduct. It's not what you wanted, but you can get rid of it. But they also sell two row corn pickers. I don't they make them any more, but

Deere made one up until the 1980s, and so I know they're still out there. You can get those kinds of things.

Andrew (01:11:16):

If you were to get back into it, like you said, to become the popcorn king-

Geo Honigford (01:11:16):

I'm not going to get back into it-

Andrew (01:11:16):

No, I said if.

Geo Honigford (01:11:21):

I'm enjoying my new life.

Andrew (01:11:21):

If you were to be that popcorn king, would you pursue the combine or would you start with a corn picker and run with that?

Geo Honigford (01:11:30):

No, I think I'd stay with the corn picker 'cause I think the moisture content's just too high here.

Andrew (01:11:35):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:11:35):

I think I was in the Midwest, I'd go right to a combine. We only have 15% moisture content in the field, but here, I don't think I... like I said, my reader only goes to 22 or something or 21, and I couldn't even register it.

Andrew (01:11:52):

Yes, same. I tried to hand shell some to test it, and I barely could do it.

Geo Honigford (01:11:52):

Right.

Andrew (01:11:57):

Then it maxed it out, and I think mine maxed out 26 or something.

Geo Honigford (01:12:02):

I'm glad you said that about the hand shell is at the end, I was good enough that I'd still put it through my tester, but I could just grab the ear and flick kernels off and say, "That's ready to go," and be pretty damn close.

Andrew (01:12:18):

I was testing myself with that, either hand shelling it with my thumb or I got one of those, a metal thing, which is slick, that's actually real fast or chewing on a kernel. I could tell, I'm like, "Okay, so this kernel was at 19%, this kernel was at 10%. What's it feel like when you bite into it?"

Geo Honigford (01:12:38):

I never thought about that one.

Andrew (01:12:39):

You could definitely get a feel for, it should crack but not shatter, and if it's chewy, then it's way too soft. It was definitely noticeable, which was interesting.

Geo Honigford (01:12:50):

Yeah, the twisty thing is, I definitely have-

Andrew (01:12:54):

Cast aluminum.

Geo Honigford (01:12:55):

Yep, you need one of those anyway, because if you're going to send it through a moisture tester, that's so easy just to grab three ears out of the bin and go, frump, frump, frump, and then I test it right there. It's like, "Okay, it needs more time," and threw all the corn I just tested right back in the bin-

Andrew (01:13:11):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:13:12):

... and off I went and said... Then after a while you start learning that, yeah, it's going to need two more hours, three more hours. It's going to need another half-a-day. You figure it out.

Andrew (01:13:22):

You get a feel for your system.

Geo Honigford (01:13:24):

Yeah. Yeah, but it's a learning curve like everything else. That's what I think I was telling you earlier, it's an art and there's science to it, but it's a feel. I love the chew thing. I never thought about that one. Now you tell me.

Andrew (01:13:43):

I think I got that 'cause my grandparents are from northwestern Ohio. So we'd go out there for the 4th of July, which is about the time that they harvest wheat, and they would sample it and chew on it and get a feel for it, so I guess that's where I got it from.

Geo Honigford (01:13:55):

Were they from in northwestern Ohio? What is it near?

Andrew (01:13:57):
Near Delta, Defiance.

Geo Honigford (01:13:58):
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Andrew (01:13:58):
Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:13:59):
Yeah, I know Defiance.

Andrew (01:14:01):
Up there. That's-

Geo Honigford (01:14:01):
Yeah, I grew up about an hour south of there. Yeah. Yeah.

Andrew (01:14:04):
That's funny.

Geo Honigford (01:14:05):
Yeah. Yeah, and then the cleaning was a whole process too. You got to get a cleaner and then it's about air, how much air you pump through the cleaner as you're cleaning it because too much air and you blow the kernels out, not enough air and the particles stay in.

Andrew (01:14:22):
You get chaff.

Geo Honigford (01:14:23):
Then ultimately, you would head to a gravity table system after the cleaner to get those bigger particles out. But my customers never complained when the bigger particles would be in there, and there was so few of them that they never complained.

Andrew (01:14:40):
Like a little piece of cob or something.

Geo Honigford (01:14:42):
It's a little piece of cob, that's exactly what it is. If you ate it's not going to hurt you. It's just a piece of cob, but it doesn't pop well.

Andrew (01:14:51):

No, neither does the chaff.

Geo Honigford (01:14:53):

No, in the industry they call them red dogs, those little, I always called them wings. So when you pour out your dried popcorn, do you see that dust come up?

Andrew (01:15:06):

Mm-hmm.

Geo Honigford (01:15:07):

It's the wings. They're right at the tip of where the corn goes into the cob and these little wings come up, and they don't separate easy. So the big boys send them through polishers to take those wings off. I never did, and no one ever complained. I never had a customer complain about the wings.

Andrew (01:15:29):

I think there's a lot of variation in variety with that type of wings or shape or size or amount pops, whether it's expands to 42% or 30%, 'cause I know you did some of the colored varieties. They generally can be a little bit smaller of a popped size.

Geo Honigford (01:15:52):

They generally are. The blue that we grew has a decent pop size. Not the biggest, but it's decent.

Andrew (01:16:02):

Versus Redenbacher's out West. They want big, fluffy-

Geo Honigford (01:16:07):

Big, fluffy.

Andrew (01:16:08):

... consistent.

Geo Honigford (01:16:09):

Big, fluffy.

Andrew (01:16:10):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:16:10):

If you taste Redenbacher's, which I always tell people, it's a great one to taste. It's beautiful looking popcorn. It is tasteless and chewy. It really has zero flavor. It's made for butter. If you don't put butter on it, you got nothing. My daughter came up with our slogan for ours, which is, "Too good for butter." Our popcorn's actually tasted good without butter.

Andrew (01:16:32):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:16:34):

So you're definitely right about the expansion. With the red dogs, the wings, I don't know. I think you might be right with that. I don't have enough experience. I've never really compared them. I've always, always had that you sell a plastic bag full of popcorn and the wings are clinging to the side when it's empty type of thing, but no one ever complained. No one ever complained about cob in it either, but I could see the pieces of cob. There wouldn't be many. It might be one or two in a bag-

Andrew (01:17:13):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:17:13):

... but it bothered me.

Andrew (01:17:15):

Of course.

Geo Honigford (01:17:15):

But it didn't bother them.

Andrew (01:17:17):

Were you sizing the kernels at all?

Geo Honigford (01:17:20):

The cleaner sizes them.

Andrew (01:17:22):

Okay.

Geo Honigford (01:17:23):

So if they're too small, they slip through the system and they get hucked out. They don't want the small ones 'cause they don't pop anyway, so you want them out. They don't pop consistently, I should say.

Andrew (01:17:37):

Right. Right.

Geo Honigford (01:17:37):

Then it's actually as I grew more popcorn, so you're a big sweet corn grower, so the red wing blackbirds would always cause me havoc in my early sweet corns. Then they settled, they liked the popcorn better, so they would jump on the popcorn and they would just eat the tops of the ears, right?

Andrew (01:18:01):

Yep.

Geo Honigford (01:18:01):

They're small kernels, so they wouldn't do me any damage anyway. So it's like, "Go to town, guys."

Andrew (01:18:07):

Have fun. You've got enough to share in your acres.

Geo Honigford (01:18:10):

They're staying out of my sweet corn, which I really care about.

Andrew (01:18:10):

Oh, yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:18:13):

They're eating the parts of my popcorn which I don't care about. They don't wreck the ear.

Andrew (01:18:17):

That's true. They just nibble on the tip.

Geo Honigford (01:18:22):

Sometimes they'll plunge into the ear, very rarely they... Why do I care? It's going to go through the system. No one ever knows that they ate that ear.

Andrew (01:18:30):

It'll be cleaned, cooked.

Geo Honigford (01:18:36):

One of the things I would do is I did a thumbnail test, and you might want to start doing that, is I would peel back the ear on it while it's still on the stalk and stick my thumb on it and press in.

Andrew (01:18:47):

Yep.

Geo Honigford (01:18:48):

If I could make an indent, it's not ready to pick.

Andrew (01:18:50):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:18:52):

When I can't indent it, then I can pick it.

Andrew (01:18:55):

I was trying to go by color to make sure it was goldening up. But then I realized once I put it in the dryer, it would go from a light yellow to dark golden, orange almost. I went, "Oh, that was interesting."

Geo Honigford (01:19:08):

Huh, huh. Yeah, I don't know about that 'cause I wasn't growing the variety. The blue would come out of the field at a very dark blue and then go light blue when drying.

Andrew (01:19:21):

Interesting.

Geo Honigford (01:19:22):

Yeah. The red didn't seem to change color at all. It seemed to be the same.

Andrew (01:19:27):

Yeah, it's likely varietal nuances.

Geo Honigford (01:19:30):

Yeah. Yeah. I was over in East Africa, you'll love this, and I was working on a project. I volunteer sometimes with USAID projects and they give me a free flight and a place to stay, and I go work with farmers. I was working with a farmer, and he had trouble getting open pollinated sweet corn. The people in Malawi love sweet corn, but they can't get the open pollinated varieties, and so they can't save their own seed 'cause it's all hybrids. I said, "I can get you some," 'cause I know High Mowing has a variety.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]I said, "I can get you some of that." He goes, "An exchange." I said, "You guys..." There's a popcorn he was growing, and it was pretty tasty. I said, "I'd like to have that." It was a golden popcorn and I grew it, and oh, my word. The plants were 15 feet high, not 10 like normal popcorn. They were 15 feet high. They were fat as hell. Each plant set five tillers out. So typically, you'll have that one plant and then a couple of little tiny tillers at the bottom. Each plant set five tillers out. Each plant had five ears of corn on it-

Andrew (01:21:02):

Whoa!

Geo Honigford (01:21:03):

... and sometimes two. It didn't make it, but the growing season wasn't long enough and it just didn't make it, and it's never going to make it. It wasn't like we had an early frost, it's just not going to make it in Vermont. But the biomass on that was incredible. I showed it to a couple of dairy farmers and they were like, they shrugged it off. It's like, "Are you kidding me? Look at the biomass of this."

Andrew (01:21:35):

Biomass is biomass when you're feeding people.

Geo Honigford (01:21:37):

Geez, I'm grown. What are you talking about? It was a fricking jungle. I don't know if a corn chopper could have cut it it was so much biomass in there, but it was fun. I wish it would've come through, but it didn't.

Andrew (01:21:53):

Close. Circling back to selling the farm, new owners, how did that transition or transaction go?

Geo Honigford (01:22:04):

Oh, it was great. I couldn't have sold it to better people.

Andrew (01:22:10):

How did you sell it? Did you go through a program?

Geo Honigford (01:22:16):

So what we did is I talked to a bunch of different folks who dabble in helping farmers sell stuff. They do it for nonprofits. They're not doing it as realtors. Then we put a package together and the Landon House for so much money, and then all the equipment came with the farm. You had to buy it because you couldn't negotiate it out. If you didn't want it, sell it was the deal. I put prices on it that I knew they could sell it for, that no problem. If something was worth 500 bucks, I priced it for 500. I didn't try to get 700 for it 'cause I wanted it to be fair, and I also didn't want to have to do an auction. I didn't want to have to sell things.

Andrew (01:23:13):

Well, especially if they wanted to do the same thing that would-

Geo Honigford (01:23:18):

And she's-

Andrew (01:23:18):

... equipment to get started with.

Geo Honigford (01:23:21):

She came from New York State. She's the main farmer, and she had a lot of her own stuff, but she's kept a lot of my stuff. She's gotten rid of some, but she's kept a lot of it. So we then just put it on, what is it called? FarmLink or what's it?

Andrew (01:23:45):

There's a farm finder, yeah, Vermont FarmLink, I think.

Geo Honigford (01:23:48):

It's something like that, and we had basically three offers in seven days.

Andrew (01:23:57):

Whoa!

Geo Honigford (01:24:01):

Part of it was our timing was good. We were selling it when the real estate market was hot. That was good. But it's also, we had a profitable operation and the house and everything looked nice. We kept everything nice. There was no weeds growing. All the equipment was well maintained. The barn was in good shape. The house was in good shape. We had just put in an underground pipeline for irrigation, and so basically, it was a turnkey. You just took it over, and we didn't have any stipulations. You didn't have to keep the name if you didn't want it. That was up to them. So we didn't have any terms.

(01:24:48):

As I was thinking of getting out, I talked to Vern Grubinger and asked him, he must have these conversations with people like me before, and he really hadn't. But I guess 'cause what you told me earlier is people just farmed til they drop dead in the field one day or til they can't do it any longer. So he said, "Post it on the listserv. See if people want to talk." I posted on the listserv and there was 10 people who said, "Yeah, let's talk about this. I'm having the same kind of thoughts. I'm thinking that I might be done too."

Andrew (01:25:26):

That kind of conversation.

Geo Honigford (01:25:27):

Yeah. Yes. I was surprised at how many people, and some of the folks I knew, and some were folks I didn't know. But I found it interesting is there was a lot of the folks were like, "Yeah, I think I'm done, but I don't want to go without turning my farm over to somebody. I want to train the new person." I totally get that 'cause that's what I wanted to do. But you know something? You could be sentencing yourself to farm forever because that person may or may not come along.

Andrew (01:26:00):

Yeah, or you want it to be most successful so you're not necessarily going to feel like, "Okay, they've got it now." I have a feeling like you might want to just, "They're not ready for me to leave yet."

Geo Honigford (01:26:13):

Well, and then some people were trying to transition and were doing exactly that, but some people were like, "I'm going to stay until I can find that right person." It's like, what if you never find the right person? Some people do, but most people don't. So it's like I can't wait for that right person 'cause I thought I had the right person a couple of times and thought, "Oh, yeah, this will be perfect. I can start training them now and in five years I'll be done, or six years or seven years and we could farm together. I can teach them everything I know and turn it over to them." But when you sell it the way I did, the issue becomes is they're going to take it in whatever direction they want. You can't mold them anymore, and so-

Andrew (01:27:03):

You let go of that control.

Geo Honigford (01:27:03):

That's totally let go of. It's theirs. They do with it what they want. So it's that or I keep farming til I can't farm anymore, and I didn't want to do that.

Andrew (01:27:18):

Right. Right. So you sold it to new farmers. Did you help them out the first year or anything to-

Geo Honigford (01:27:27):

Oh, yeah.

Andrew (01:27:28):

... help them with the lay of the land or...

Geo Honigford (01:27:31):

That was part of the deal is I was at their beck and call. She didn't need help with, "How do I grow beets?" She knows how to do that. "How do I grow carrots?" That's not her thing. Her thing was like, "Oh, we're having trouble with the irrigation pump."

Andrew (01:27:50):

Some of the infrastructure-

Geo Honigford (01:27:51):

Yeah.

Andrew (01:27:51):

... sort of stuff.

Geo Honigford (01:27:52):

Those little things you know that you can-

Andrew (01:27:57):

"How do I start this thing?" Right.

Geo Honigford (01:27:59):

Exactly, "Where is this?" "Where do I locate this on the property?" "Where's this. Where's that?" "Where's the shutoff for this in the house?" That kind of stuff. I'd just come right over and show them. I think the only thing she had never done before was done hay. So the first time or two that she did cut hay, I came over and showed her, "This is dry. This is not dry. This is how do you knot the baler," and things like that. I don't know if she called me at all this past year. If she did, it was just in passing when she saw me, but I'm still at her beck and call. If she wants help, I'll come right over-

Andrew (01:28:48):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:28:48):

... because I want to see her succeed. I want her to be successful. So if it takes me a few hours every now and then to make her successful, I'm so willing to do that.

Andrew (01:29:02):

Well, right. You've learned so much about that space and set it up.

Geo Honigford (01:29:06):

Right.

Andrew (01:29:07):

You're saving her so much time to figure it out.

Geo Honigford (01:29:09):

Right. But I think last year was a big learning curve year for her. This past year was her second year so I think she's got less questions.

Andrew (01:29:20):

Yeah. You get the flywheels starting to spin-

Geo Honigford (01:29:22):

Right.

Andrew (01:29:23):

... which is good.

Geo Honigford (01:29:24):

Right. Right.

Andrew (01:29:26):

You mentioned it earlier, but I just want to circle back, see if you had anything else to say. What does sustainable farming mean to you and what did you do to achieve that?

Geo Honigford (01:29:37):

Yeah, I did talk about that, how sustainability begins with letter P for profit. When I say this, I think people automatically go to, "Oh, he's just in it for the money." If I was in something for the money, it wouldn't be farming, first of all. But I want to make a living, and that's what sustainability is. If you can make a living doing it, then you're sustainable. If you're killing yourself to do it and you're miserable, that's not sustainable 'cause you can't keep doing it year after year.

(01:30:15):

I think sustainability also goes beyond just farming. It goes beyond with your whole life. So I could stay farming and is that sustainable for me as a person? I'm not going to mention names, but I see people, and I've talked to people who are miserable and they farm because they don't know how to do... They're in that site, they don't want to give up the identity of a farmer or they haven't found the right person, or it's like this isn't sustainable. You're living your life like you have unlimited lifespan and you don't. I'll be lucky to have 20 more years left in me. So really, I'm going to farm for my last 20 years? I think I'd rather hike Kilimanjaro.

Andrew (01:31:09):

Yeah, do some new things like you said.

Geo Honigford (01:31:11):

Yeah. I think the answer most people would give to that is most people would say the answer is sustainability. They talk about soils and biodiversity and things like that, which it's all important and I believe in all that stuff. But it doesn't matter how noble you are with that stuff. If you can't make money, you're not sustainable 'cause we live in a real world here, and you got to pay your taxes. If you can't do that kind of stuff, then you lose the farm. The other thing is if your farm falls down around you, I see this too, people are barely sustainable. They're sustaining a business, but their infrastructure's falling apart all around them, house is falling down, barns are falling down. You got nothing to sell. So that's what I had to sell. It turns out that for every year, I'm not going to say this number, but for every year I was farming, if I look at how much we sold the farm for compared to what we bought it for, we made a lot of money just doing the real estate transaction because we kept it nice.

Andrew (01:32:27):

Yep. It truly was an investment for you.

Geo Honigford (01:32:31):

Yeah. Yeah, and I don't let weeds grow. I don't have burdocks growing around the farm. That's not going to happen. It's all trimmed down. It all looks nice. There's no junk equipment around, and it's part of what you have to sell. I know when the farming season's going on, you're a big yank and you've got a million things to do. It's like, "Oh, I don't want to weed whack." Actually, in reality only takes an hour-and-a-half to weed whack, and you only have to do it every three weeks. It's not like it's that bad, and it looks great when you get done.

Andrew (01:33:05):

It's very satisfying.

Geo Honigford (01:33:06):

If you don't do it, it's almost impossible to knock it down 'cause the plants are so big. Then it becomes an onerous chore, and then you're certainly not going to do it. So my advice is weed whack, get rid of all your junk.

Andrew (01:33:22):

Weed whacking and junk equipment, is that an aesthetics thing for you, or was that more like efficiency, "We don't need that, so get it out of here," sort of thing?

Geo Honigford (01:33:31):

Less than that, more the first, the aesthetics. If the farm looks nice, that two things happen. I learned this, I worked at a metal stamping company once, and that factory floor was immaculate. The break room, immaculate. The pride the employees took in that place was very high 'cause it looked great and they took good care of it. It's the same thing, so if you have a nice looking farm, the employees, first of all, appreciate that. They value it, and they'll work harder and treat things nicer, and the customers love

it. So if you have a farm stand and everything on the farm looks beautiful, they love it, so it's going to bring in... and it gives them confidence-

Andrew (01:34:26):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:34:27):

... that they're supporting a winning cause and that this is truly, you must know what you're doing 'cause look how beautiful it is type of thing. So yeah, don't ignore your real estate, 'cause what I do now. I buy old houses. I fix them up and sell them.

Andrew (01:34:49):

You make them look pretty.

Geo Honigford (01:34:50):

I make them look pretty. So I'm buying crap houses. They look like crap when I buy them, and in the end, they look great. So no matter how run down you've made your farm look, you can bring it back, it just takes elbow grease. It takes time. A lot of this stuff doesn't necessarily take a lot of money, it just takes a lot of time. But if you let it run down, you got less.

Andrew (01:35:16):

Was that a personal choice for you, or did you have your employees on board and they helped have that culture of cleaning things up and taking care of equipment?

Geo Honigford (01:35:27):

Once you clean it up, they clean up. Then they'll do it.

Andrew (01:35:31):

You set the model.

Geo Honigford (01:35:32):

You set the model, right. But yeah, no, it was me setting the pace. But yeah, no, I just wanted them to do the farm work. I kept the farm looking nice. All the maintenance stuff, that's what I did.

Andrew (01:35:45):

That's the fun stuff anyway.

Geo Honigford (01:35:49):

Yeah, they can go pick beets. I've picked plenty of those in my life.

Andrew (01:35:52):

I got to go mow. How big a crew did you have when things were rocking and rolling?

Geo Honigford (01:36:00):

That's the other thing, we're a lean, mean fighting machine.

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Geo Honigford (01:36:00):

That's the other thing. We were a lean, mean fighting machine. Small. Three of us full-time on the farm, but two of us are working 70 hours. What's that really translate to? It's maybe five. I finally went to the H-2A worker, and I got this guy from Mexico, it was great. Still a fantastic friend of mine today. I went to his wedding in Mexico, it was so much fun. I mean, he was upset if I didn't give him 70 hours a week. He wanted 70, 80, 90, didn't care. He's got a family back in Mexico, he wants to go home, he just wants to make money. I didn't need that many employees if I got Danny around who wants to work all these hours, and I'll just give him all the hours he wants. Yeah, just three. When we go to sell to Farmer's Market in the peak season, we'd have four of us working. That was actually the busiest day all week. I mean, we worked hard at the Farmer's Market, so you're flat out for four hours.

Andrew (01:37:28):

Just going.

Geo Honigford (01:37:29):

Yeah, so if you factor in that, then maybe another person on top, but-

Andrew (01:37:34):

Right. Yeah, your full-time is every day, including weekends for the summer season.

Geo Honigford (01:37:40):

Exactly.

Andrew (01:37:40):

Right.

(01:37:42):

No, that's a lot of farming for, like you said, that's a lean crew.

Geo Honigford (01:37:48):

Yeah, we were lean. Yeah, but I'm efficient. That's another thing I'm good at. Again, not probably technically the best grower in the world, but... The other thing we did is, we had a zero weed tolerance policy that paid off over the years, that we just didn't let anything go to seed. You have to work like hell to reclaim an area, but once you get it, the area reclaimed and nothing goes to seed, every year you weed less, but you have to stay on it. You're constantly weeding, but there are not many of them, and so you do... We could take a tractor through some popcorn and then go back, two days later, we'd go through with a hand hose to pick up what the tractor missed, and it was all going according to plan. One guy might be able to get through an acre in an hour and a half, and that's picking up the things that the tractor missed.

(01:38:50):

Now, I didn't have to do that. I could have let those go to seed and the corn crop would've been just as good, but then next year I'm dealing with extra weed seeds and it's like... I'd always tell people we're weeding for next year, it's not about this year. This year we got it, but it's next year I'm weeding for. The year I sold the farm, I knew I was selling it, but I kept it weed free, because I said, I made it weed free, I'm selling it weed free. I'm not going to-

Andrew (01:39:21):

What happens after, that's on them.

Geo Honigford (01:39:22):

That's on them, but they're getting what I told them I was going to give them, which is a weed free field.

Andrew (01:39:28):

No, that's nice too, because a lot of farmers, like you said, they get tired, they don't invest, they don't clean things up, and then like you said, they don't have a lot to sell, or it's harder for a new farmer to pick up something where the weeds got bad and the fields are tired and not fertilized and things like that. That probably helped Ashley out a lot that you kept it going.

Geo Honigford (01:39:50):

Yeah, you have to ask Ashley. I like to think so.

Andrew (01:39:55):

Yeah. It's not like you were like, well, the fun of farming is fading off, so you didn't put in as much effort. It sounds like you still gave it the effort right to the end.

Geo Honigford (01:40:08):

Yeah, I did. I think had I stayed at it more, I wouldn't have.

Andrew (01:40:16):

Right. You quit while you were ahead.

Geo Honigford (01:40:18):

I quit while I was ahead. That's exactly right. I was ahead of the game, but I saw myself as not being ahead of the game in the future. There was something else I wanted to do.

Andrew (01:40:31):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:40:32):

It's like, I'm not going to do it. I mean, the first year I didn't farm, I took a trip to Zimbabwe to work with farmers. I went to England to hike. I went to Newfoundland, drove up to Newfoundland for two and a half weeks-

Andrew (01:40:48):

Because you could?

Geo Honigford (01:40:49):

Because I could. I mean, yeah, I never could have done any of those things, and I did them all.

Andrew (01:40:59):

Do you say you've retired from farming or do you say you just changed careers?

Geo Honigford (01:41:03):

I tell people I changed careers. People around here think... The word was, I've retired. It's like, I haven't retired. I'm still working.

Andrew (01:41:15):

Just changing it up.

Geo Honigford (01:41:16):

Yeah, I just changed careers.

Andrew (01:41:17):

Yeah. What did you do to disconnect from the farm that has a never ending to-do list? Like you said, it's always on your mind, but was there something you did that kind of helped take a breath of fresh air and collect yourself?

Geo Honigford (01:41:37):

You mean while I was farming or after I stopped farming?

Andrew (01:41:40):

Well, both, but while you were farming?

Geo Honigford (01:41:44):

Well, while I was farming, I tried to carve out. Didn't always happen, but I tried to carve out Sundays, especially in the afternoon to go hiking, maybe even mid-morning, I could get out and go hiking. If we were haying, that was the only thing that kept me in town. We have to make hay, you have to make hay. That also helped a lot when Danny came on board, the guy from Mexico, because then he could watch the farm stand. If someone needed to get corn or get more lettuce on there, he was there, he wanted the hours. Asking him to work on a Sunday... At first I thought, I can't ask him to work on Sunday, but I realized, no, he actually wants to work on Sunday. I think that's what I would do. I always tried to get away for a period of days in June. It always seemed to be a little window where I could skate out for three to five days.

Andrew (01:42:52):

Once things got planted?

Geo Honigford (01:42:53):

Yeah, but then I came back and it would always be, even in the three to five days or seven days, it would be a mess when I got back.

Andrew (01:43:00):

That's when the weeds leap.

Geo Honigford (01:43:04):

Yeah. It was always like, I paid for it, but I tried to do that.

Andrew (01:43:07):

Yeah. Farming can be a lonely occupation. How did you connect with people to break that isolation?

Geo Honigford (01:43:18):

Well, I think two things. I was worried about that because I was coming from school teaching where you're not never alone to farming, and so I wondered how I was going to do with that, and it turned out to be not even an issue. I think the two things that helped me a lot with that is, number one, the Farmer's Market. On Saturday, I got lots of people coming up, talking to me, interacting with me, giving me really positive things. Number two is my off-farm hobbies, this will seem weird, but I sit on boards, school boards, planning commissions, whatever, and so usually I'd probably average two meetings a week, and then often, sometimes, depending on what the board is, we'll head uptown and have a couple of beers. I think that's how I connect with people.

Andrew (01:44:22):

If you were on boards, yeah, a couple of meetings a week, plus your Farmer's Market, that's quite a bit of social interaction.

Geo Honigford (01:44:27):

Yeah, so I never felt absence that way.

Andrew (01:44:32):

How has the marketplace changed from during your career of farming?

Geo Honigford (01:44:38):

I don't know if the marketplace has changed so much as what I sold changed. When I first got into farming, you sold a lot of leaf lettuce, and when I stopped, you sold not that much, you sold a lot of masculine, you sell a lot of arugula. Those kind of things changed, but it doesn't strike me that the market changed. I mean, my personal touch on the market changed because I stopped, I tried to get out of wholesaling as quick as I could, it took me a long time. If you're going to wholesale, wholesale, don't mess around with it. Don't nickel and dime it. People would do things like, they would wholesale a box of broccoli to a restaurant and it would take them 30 minutes to deliver it. It was just one box of broccoli for $40. Compost it.

Andrew (01:45:44):

It doesn't add up.

Geo Honigford (01:45:46):

It doesn't add up. You can't make money on that. Your delivery time ate up everything. I'd tell people, restaurants would call me up and say, oh yeah, we're interested in buying from you, and I'd say, look, if you're not going to hit a certain dollar amount, I'm not even going to sell. I mean, I'll sell, you have to come get it.

Andrew (01:46:00):

Right.

Geo Honigford (01:46:01):

I'll sell to you on the farm all the time, but I'm not going to deliver for a box of broccoli. It's not going to happen.

Andrew (01:46:08):

Delivering is expensive when you add up your time and travel time, equipment, wear and tear, mileage, whatever.

Geo Honigford (01:46:13):

And then opportunity cost. What didn't you get done on the farm because you were delivering?

Andrew (01:46:18):

Right?

Geo Honigford (01:46:21):

Unless you're hitting a certain dollar amount, I don't even think about it. What I'll say about the marketplace is, every year there seemed to be more growers, and every year there seemed to be more market. I never lost my share because somebody else came in, I never lost. They might have, maybe I was selling lettuce to that Co-op, and somebody else came in and I snoozed for a second, and they jumped in and they took that over.

(01:46:57):

It never seemed to bother my bottom line. I was like, great, they took it over. I guess I won't do that anymore, and that's okay, and I'm still making more money than I did last year so this is all working out. All these new growers would keep coming in, and it just seemed like the market kept expanding. The other thing is, you don't hear as much. When I first started, there was, I used to call it the starving farmer thing, where people used to talk about how they weren't making money and how proud they were of not making money, they are a starving farmer. Aren't we great because noble and we're not making money and we're just growing food for people? You don't hear about that as much.

(01:47:43):

I think people are kind of coming around to, I actually have to make some money. But you still do hear it occasionally. That's the one thing I actually would caution farmers to get that out of your head, actually. To me, what I was doing is, maybe I was growing food for people. That's ancillary to everything. I was outside, I was doing what I wanted to do. I was making a living, and these people were supporting me doing it. Awesome. I never saw myself as any more noble than the UPS guy because I need Argal, I

needed them to deliver the part to fix my tractor. I couldn't do it without them. I can't do without the guy who delivers, Argal who delivers the tanker trucks of diesel. I can't do without-

Andrew (01:48:40):

Plays a part.

Geo Honigford (01:48:42):

We all play a part, and I just happen to be at the end of the food part of it, but I can't do it without them. I think sometimes we put ourselves on a pedestal too much and think that what we're doing is noble. I don't think it's any more noble than, like they said, the UPS driver.

Andrew (01:49:05):

Like you said, we're just facing the customer. You're right, we're at the top of the food chain, so to speak.

Geo Honigford (01:49:13):

I think if you dealt with somebody who's out there growing 20,000 acres of broccoli in the Central Valley, they'll say, why do you even do business? I can supply that whole market. We don't even need you doing that. Is he more noble than I am because he grows more broccoli than I do, at a cheaper price? Right? Anyway, I never bought into that, and I think it's dangerous that people do buy into what I'm doing is extra special, because it's not. I will say, we're more special than the people selling Coca-Cola. We are more special than them.

Andrew (01:49:59):

Yeah. That's one thing I often talk about with new growers or growers who I know have a lot of other farms around them, as sometimes we'll talk about the competition, but I think the conversation very quickly goes to the rising tide lifts all ships. The more people I interview and the more farms I visit, everybody has a different story, everybody has a different niche. Even in my town, we're growing pick your own flowers. The next town over is also growing pick your own flowers, but our target audience and the people who are coming to our farms are two completely different people, and that's totally okay.

Geo Honigford (01:50:38):

Right. There's another farm here in town that we would loan each other equipment. We're both at the Norwich Farmer's Market, seemingly competing with each other, but they didn't have a farm stand, and I do. They have a CSA and I didn't. Where we competed didn't seem to be a problem. We exchanged knowledge and equipment, and I totally agree, I think that... I mean, all the car dealers, they all locate right next to each other.

Andrew (01:51:14):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:51:15):

They're not afraid of their competition, so they're like, bring it on. We are going to make it easy for people to shop for a car. We're going to be all right next to each other.

Andrew (01:51:24):

There you go.

Geo Honigford (01:51:25):

I agree, I think people find their own little niches and sometimes they compete a little bit, but it's not in a super intensive, one of us has to win, one of us is going to lose, type of way.

Andrew (01:51:41):

What's one of your best memories from your first 10 years and the last 10 years?

Geo Honigford (01:51:45):

Jesus. Some of these questions.

Andrew (01:51:49):

These last couple ones actually came from Mark and Christa. I asked what would they ask.

Geo Honigford (01:51:54):

Mark and Christa?

Andrew (01:51:55):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:51:56):

From Jericho Settlers?

Andrew (01:51:57):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:51:57):

Oh, no kidding. Okay, what was that question again?

Andrew (01:52:03):

Your best memory from your first and, or last 10 years.

Geo Honigford (01:52:12):

It's really hard to do those kind of things. I mean-

Andrew (01:52:17):

Here's a little bit similar. What's been your greatest achievement?

Geo Honigford (01:52:24):

I think probably ultimately the greatest achievement for my farming career is the fact that I was able to sell my farm. That showed that I had built something up that somebody else wanted to take over. I think

that was probably it. In terms of memories of the first 10 years, it's hard to do because the farm life is so all encompassing. I think about taking my kids down to the river, which was right on the farm. We didn't leave the farm to go swimming in the river.

Andrew (01:53:10):

There's not one memory, it's a story.

Geo Honigford (01:53:15):

Yeah, thanks for putting words in my mouth, but I think that's it. I mean, I told you earlier about that big hay run. First 10 years, okay, here's the story. Within the first 10 years, we knocked a crap ton of hay down. I mean, had just probably a thousand bales on the ground and someone was supposed to come and bale and he hurt his back. That's right. Someone else was supposed to come and help me collect, and his wife went into labor.

Andrew (01:53:56):

Oh, geez.

Geo Honigford (01:53:58):

I'm like, holy crap-

Andrew (01:54:00):

I got a thousand pounds down.

Geo Honigford (01:54:01):

I got all this, unbaled, just sitting on the ground. My wife started making all these phone calls and all these people just started arriving out of nowhere. I'm on the tractor spitting the bales out, and all of a sudden these people are coming in, and literally rain is coming, rain is coming and literally got the last load in the barn, and the rains just goes... That's kind of a good memory.

Andrew (01:54:32):

I think all of us hay farmers have a memory like that.

Geo Honigford (01:54:33):

Yeah. We have memories. We don't think about the ones where we actually didn't get it in.

Andrew (01:54:37):

Yeah, exactly. We don't talk about those.

Geo Honigford (01:54:43):

Last 10 years. I don't know. Not that I don't have memories. I think the last 10 years, it's more of a story. It's like this meeting Danny, that guy from Mexico. I mean, he's really influenced my life in ways he doesn't even know. I mean, I'm trying very hard to learn Spanish better. All the music I listen to now is all Mexican music, because I really like their music, because he listened to it and I was like, I like this

stuff. I think that's a strong association with that, because I think he's been a positive influence in my life.

Andrew (01:55:26):

Yeah. No, that's good. I've talked to other growers who were thinking about getting into the H-2A program, wanting to bring those workers on. Was that difficult to do?

Geo Honigford (01:55:41):

No. It's bureaucracy, you got to fight through that, but once you're there, they're great. In the end, Danny's brother also came in and worked for me as well. The other growers told me I was going to go there, and I kept saying, no I have no trouble hiring Americans, and then I started having trouble. These guys will bail you out. Like I said, you can't overwork them. I wouldn't call them necessarily better workers than Americans, but they'll stay in the saddle longer. They have nothing else to do. That's the only reason they're here is to make money. Think about it, if you went somewhere to make money for six months-

Andrew (01:56:22):

Yeah, you're going to do all you can.

Geo Honigford (01:56:24):

You're going to make all you can.

Andrew (01:56:26):

You can't go home.

Geo Honigford (01:56:28):

Your family's waiting for you to come back, and so you just make all the money you can.

Andrew (01:56:35):

Yeah, I've only really heard good things about that, other than it's a learning curve for both people about managing them and training and things like that, but you're going to have that with anybody.

Geo Honigford (01:56:51):

Yeah. These guys, they've got all the checks that I want from an employee. They're honest, they care-

Andrew (01:57:05):

They show up.

Geo Honigford (01:57:06):

They show up. That's check, check, check.

Andrew (01:57:09):

It is time for our special segment. What's in your pocket.

(01:57:25):

On the day-to-day basis. What are you carrying with you? That could be now, especially doing carpenter things, what do you always have on you that makes your day in the job go as planned?

Geo Honigford (01:57:39):

Well, I've got my tool belt.

Andrew (01:57:40):

Right, exactly. You've got a tool belt, so what's in your tool belt?

Geo Honigford (01:57:43):

On my tool belt, always has the same things in the same places. I got my wire cutters and my wire strippers. I got my multi-head screwdriver. I got a pair of pliers. I got a utility knife. I got a piece of sandpaper. Very important. I have a chisel, a screwdriver I can use as a pounding device. I don't give a shit about it. Hammer, tape measure, marker, pencil, always there. I wear it almost all day, all the time.

Andrew (01:58:25):

No matter what you're doing?

Geo Honigford (01:58:27):

Yeah. Sometimes I'll take it off, but most of the time it's there because then I don't have to walk around and say, where's the screwdriver? Where did I set it down? I set it down here. Even if it doesn't make any sense, I know where everything is if I carry it-

Andrew (01:58:41):

Well, whether you're framing or doing electrical, it's generally those tools, across the board?

Geo Honigford (01:58:48):

Yeah.

(01:58:49):

That's why at the wire strippers, that's only used when I'm doing electrical, but right now I'm doing a demo job, and so you'd come across wires, it's like, yeah, I don't want that wire there. Right? You're always doing some wiring all the time.

Andrew (01:59:04):

Yeah, especially with renovations. You're not doing new construction where you can do one thing at a time.

Geo Honigford (01:59:11):

Absolutely. I'm doing multi things at the same time.

Andrew (01:59:15):

Is there anything else that you'd like to share? Any further advice for growers?

Geo Honigford (01:59:23):

Beyond just saying enjoy it, but don't let it own you. It doesn't define you. When you no longer enjoy it, stop. If you enjoy it till you die, great. If that's what you want to do till you die... That's what I thought, I wanted to do it till I died, but it isn't. Acknowledge it, embrace it, and go to the next place, but don't do it just because you thought you were going to do it forever. Right?

Andrew (01:59:56):

Yeah.

Geo Honigford (01:59:57):

I guess it'd be like a marriage, right? You married your spouse because you thought, I'm in this for the long run, but if things go real south, would you really want to stay in a bad marriage forever, even though you worked on it and you tried to change it and it's just not happening? Get out. I'm still married, by the way, it's still the same woman.

Andrew (02:00:25):

It's the same one. I was just going to say-

Geo Honigford (02:00:31):

No, I'm sticking with that one for now.

Andrew (02:00:33):

Good. For now. Oh, boy. Any advice in order to keep a happy wife while farming, because that can be challenging too?

Geo Honigford (02:00:43):

I think you should ask her that. I remember when we went to visit a friend, a really good friend, and Sharon told our friend, she goes, Geo's going to sell the farm, and the friend gets up and just goes, oh, honey, and she gives my wife a big hug, big hug. I'm like, whoa, so this has been hard on Sharon, my wife, Sharon, the whole time, and she's never complained about it. But my friend immediately didn't turn to me and say anything. She just turned to Sharon and said, congratulations.

Andrew (02:01:31):

Interesting.

Geo Honigford (02:01:32):

I thought it was really interesting, actually. I was blown away actually by it. I think most couples tend to farm together, so I think we're a bit unusual that we don't. I don't know, you've seem to talk to more people than I do.

Andrew (02:01:52):

Some do, some don't.

Geo Honigford (02:01:53):

Yeah. It's like someone told me when we had kids is that the kids are going to be around for 18, 20 years and they're gone and you're still going to be married, so what do you need to do for yourselves to keep that relationship going? It's a lot easier doing what we did as vegetable farmers because winters get light and you don't have to work so hard, so you can spend more time on the relationship. But I think summers were hard for her, but I think she's really good at dealing with it.

Andrew (02:02:36):

She understood that you had to put in the extra time in the summer?

Geo Honigford (02:02:42):

Yeah. She didn't-

Andrew (02:02:43):

A lot of people just wouldn't get that or accept that. I think they'd be like, well, I want you here on the weekends, and you can't do that with the farm.

Geo Honigford (02:02:52):

Yeah. No, she didn't.

Andrew (02:02:53):

That's great.

Geo Honigford (02:02:54):

No, she was good about that, but I think she silently complained. Like I said, with her friend's reaction, that told me that.

Andrew (02:03:02):

But you weren't really aware that that was that?

Geo Honigford (02:03:02):

No.

Andrew (02:03:04):

Yeah, that's-

Geo Honigford (02:03:05):

Blew me away. The one thing I'll say is, what has helped is I feel free. I feel liberated. I can do what I want when I want to do it. I'm not beholden to anybody's schedule. I'm still self-employed, and I work on old houses, and if I leave an old house for two weeks, it looks just the same as when I get back. Nothing has changed. Try doing that on your farm.

Andrew (02:03:44):

Fair enough. Awesome. Well, thank you. Thanks for sharing your story. Thanks for sitting down with me and talking farming.

Geo Honigford (02:03:54):
Oh, sure.

Andrew (02:03:55):
I appreciate it.

Geo Honigford (02:03:57):
I hope it helps somebody.

Andrew (02:03:58):
I'm sure it will. I'm sure it does.
(02:04:00):
Thanks.

Geo Honigford (02:04:00):
Thanks for coming-

Andrew (02:04:01):
Yeah.

Geo Honigford (02:04:02):
Bye.

Andrew (02:04:09):
That was the Farmer's Share. I hope you enjoyed that episode, getting to know Geo of Hurricane Flats Farm and hearing his farming story. The new owners of the farm are on Instagram. If you'd like to see some photos of the farm at Hurricane Flats. The Farmer's share is supported by a grant offered by the USDA Specialty Crop Block Program from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets. This funding helps to cover some of my time and travel in order to produce these podcasts for the next two and a half years. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service supports projects that address the needs of US specialty crop growers and strengthens local and regional food systems. I have no doubt that this podcast will meet those needs and help educate growers to support the industry. This show also is supported by the Ag Engineering program of the University of Vermont Extension.
(02:05:04):
If you enjoyed the show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting the farmershare.com/support. We also receive funding from the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. The VVBGA is a nonprofit organization funded in 1976 to promote the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of vegetable and berry farming in Vermont. Their membership includes over 400 farms across Vermont and beyond, as well as about 50 businesses and organizations that provide products and services of all types to their members. Benefits to members include access to the VVBGA listserv, to buy, sell plants and equipment, share farming information, and tap the vast experience of our growers, access the Community Accreditation for Produce Safety, also known as CAPS. This program is designed for growers by growers to help you easily meet market and regulatory food safety expectations. You can access the VVBGAs Soil

Health Platform where you can organize all the soil tests and create and store your Soil Amendment plans and records.

(02:06:18):

Access to webinars for growers in the VVBGA annual meeting. An email subscription to the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Newsletter, comradery, enhanced communication and fellowship among commercial growers. Memberships are on a per farm per calendar year basis, and annual dues this year are $80. These funds pay for the organization's operating costs and support educational programs and research projects. These funds also support projects that address grower needs around Ag Engineering, high tunnel production, pest management, pollinators, produce safety, and soil health. Become a member today to be a part of, and further support the veg and berry industry. You can visit the farmersshare.com to listen to previous interviews or see photos, videos, or links discussed from the conversation. If you don't want to miss the next episode, enter your email address on our website and you'll get a note in your inbox when the next one comes out.

(02:07:20):

The Farmer's Share has a YouTube channel with videos from several of the farm visits. We're also on Instagram, and that's where you can be reminded about the latest episode or see photos from the visit. Lastly, if you're enjoying the show, I'd love it if you could write a review. An Apple podcast, just click on the show, scroll down to the bottom, and there you can leave five stars in a comment to help encourage new listeners to tune in. I'd also encourage you to share this episode with other grower friends or crew who you think would be inspiring for them. Thanks for listening.

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