Small-scale Food Initiatives in Southwest Minnesota: Oral History Project 2012-13

Institute for Advanced Study
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Producer of the Documentary American Meat
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Graham Meriwether: The long story of how I came to do what I’m doing is that in 2002, I was in my senior year of college and I was working as a poetry major so I was interested in becoming a poet. I was in a workshop of people that are all poetry majors and I went to make a point about a poem and in order to make a point, I referenced another poem we were workshopping and in a room full of poetry majors, almost no one had actually read the poem that I referenced. As I was walking down the stairs after class that day, I started to have an epiphany. If in a room full of poetry majors, no one read the poem, and the way I ended up making my point in my discussion of the poem was by actually referencing a film. Here I am, in a room full of poetry majors and in order to make a point about a poem, I had to reference a film. My thought was: if I really want to express myself creatively, I am going to have to change mediums. It is very difficult to get people to read poetry and have social conversations about them. I would give books of poetry that I had written to friends and a couple weeks later, I’d be like, “What did you think?” I could see in their eyes that they hadn’t been able to read it.

I decided that I would take a course in documentary filmmaking and, right after graduating from the University of Colorado, I signed up for a five-week crash course in documentary filmmaking in New York City. I was 22 and not a super realistic person anyway, I thought that I would learn to become a filmmaker in five weeks and then I was going to move to Spain and be a “filmmaker.” I really liked the idea of sleeping after I ate lunch, you know, the siesta.

About two weeks into the five-week boot camp, I realized that it was going to take me many years to become a filmmaker and that wasn’t even a sure thing. After I completed the five-week course, I threw myself into every type of production job. I was shooting, editing, and producing on a number of different projects in New York. The summer of 2006 was really a transformative summer for me. I was hired by A&E to be a field producer and a cinematographer for a documentary series called “The First 48.” For those of you who aren’t familiar with “The First 48,” it is a documentary series that follows homicide investigations in various cities across America. The reason it is called “The First 48” is because if the police don’t get a lead in the first 48 hours after a homicide, their chances of becoming successful in finding the perpetrator seriously declines after the first 48 hours. It was a very depressing summer. I had a cell phone on me and every time that somebody got killed in the city of Detroit, I would get a phone call. I would put on a bullet-resistant vest and drive to the scene. Usually it was about two or three in the morning, in the most dangerous neighborhoods in Detroit. Then we would film straight for days without sleeping as they followed the investigations and manhunts. During the course of that summer, there were 60 homicides in the city of Detroit, which was actually more than there were in the city of Miami that year. I was very focused in those situations. You start to look at what it is you’re doing with your life and why it is you’re doing what you’re doing with your life.

In one of our few days off (I think we had just finished where they had caught one of the perpetrators in a homicide), I actually went to a film called *An Inconvenient Truth*, which I’m sure a number of the viewers have seen. I went to that film and it was laid out in a very logical way to me that we’re facing some challenges on earth. Throughout the first half of the film, I was like, just tell me what to do. I will do whatever it takes to help reverse some of these
challenges that our earth faces. The second half of the film, just like the first half, did a wonderful job explaining all of the problems that we face, but really never provided any solutions.

After some rumination that summer and the summer of 2006, I had also started reading this book called *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. I decided that instead of just turning my camera just on whoever hires me and, in this case, turning the lens that I was recording things with for my job, instead of turning on the worst of what mankind is capable of through the homicides, I started a company called Leave It Better. Leave It Better’s entire purpose is to provide tangible environmental solutions. As I was reading this book, through video and through community action, as a journalist, I am always looking for people who are passionate and charismatic about topics, things that are really important to them.

Joel Salatin was jumping off the page with charisma. I sent Joel an e-mail and said we’d love to come to your farm and film. The first film that I was going to do was a film called “Green Pioneers” and I had reached out to pioneers in a number of different areas in the green movement and one of them was Joel Salatin in agriculture. There’s this wonderful electronics recycler James Burgid in the San Francisco area who has a wonderful story of transformation. There was a couple in Toronto that had created zero waste for an entire month. There was green business and green building. I had chosen all of these leaders in these various areas and was going to do segments on them and put that together as a documentary. I started doing that. I went to all of these places and filmed with all these people, but Joel had this vitality. There was a vitality about all of them. It wouldn’t be fair to be a film called “Green Pioneers” because all of these people needed their own film to address the topics that were being discussed.

The topic that was the most vital and jumping off of the screen with interest was definitely the time I spent at Joel Salatin’s farm. I sent Joel this e-mail in 2006, he said, yes, and I went down to the farm. The original concept was that it was going to be a film where we didn’t use any narration. We were just going to use the structure of the seasons and the interactions between Joel and his family, the animals, the landscape, and the environment. We did that and then Joel had been talking a lot about conventional agriculture. When we started editing the film in 2008, after we spent a year filming in 2007, we didn’t have any footage from the conventional side of things. We sent out and got some stock footage from PETA that was basically showing the conventional side of things through hidden cameras.

As a journalist, it didn’t feel right. I decided we weren’t going to use any footage from PETA, any hidden camera footage in the film. I spent the next couple years, 2009 and 2010, going and filming at conventional chicken farms and hog farms and cattle field yards and realized that it was a lot more complicated than good and evil. There were a lot of farmers that were forced into conventional agriculture because they didn’t have a way to have a market. Then we realized that there’s this incredibly exciting movement of farmers selling directly to their customers. That’s a way that farmers can get more of the food dollar. After four and half years of filming, we edited together and finished the documentary “American Meat,” which is the first documentary from Leave It Better. That would be the answer to how I got to be where I am today.
**Peter Shea:** Do you think now, this many years after 2002, that you were right about video reaching people in ways that poetry didn’t?

**Graham:** Yes, it’s funny, I’ve actually joked in my head to myself that I left poetry because no one reads poetry and now I am in documentary filmmaking and no one watches documentary film. I do think that people are watching more documentary films and I feel like video literacy is going to be one of the big changes in the way that our culture communicates. Right now, if you are going to school as a first through eighth grader, you learn how to write and you learn the basics of math and of science, but you don’t learn the basics of video storytelling and I think that will change because more and more in our culture, it is a lot easier to pull out your phone and take a photograph or use the video function of your phone to communicate with somebody else. It is today just as important to be able to communicate with video, as it is to be able to communicate and write paragraphs with proper grammar.

The other really exciting thing is, for the first time in film history, you can get an incredible camera for a few hundred dollars. You can get a laptop that has editing software that is absolutely the most professional editing software you can have—for a pretty small start-up cost of a couple thousand dollars that you could probably get through loans if you didn’t have the ability to save up for that type of money. You can actually get an idea and make a movie. It’s like when you have the printing press. You get an idea and write a book. It’s getting to be that same way.

It’s an incredibly exciting time to be doing documentary films and to be communicating through video with people, especially when you have something like the food movement, where there’s this incredible grassroots infrastructure in place with co-ops and various farms and various companies that are really interested in this. You have all this infrastructure and you can actually create a film for a low cost and you can really get a message to a group of people who want to hear that message in a way that hasn’t been possible before.

**Peter:** Whom do you want to communicate with and what do you want them to do?

**Graham:** The biggest target audience for our documentary is young farmers and people who are interested in farming. One of the things that has been wonderful is that we’ve been able to do a number of screenings for FFA chapters all throughout the state of Iowa. For those of you who aren’t aware, FFA is an acronym that stands for Future Farmers of America. Basically, it’s an organization that is dedicated to celebrating the work that farmers do. There are over 500,000 young American people in that organization. I’d like to reach everyone. I’d like to reach the general audience. I feel like there’s a great value in people seeing the work and the challenges and the joys that farmers share every day and go through every day. That’s a great value, but from a very pragmatic standpoint, the people that I want to see the film more than anyone are young people that are growing up on a farm or are interested in agriculture because a lot of the time they aren’t aware of these alternative agricultural methods and they can actually get into farming without as much upfront cost as the conventional ways. Because our film doesn’t alienate one side or the other side, we are able to reach those young farmers and I think have an impact.
One of the great things that just happened is that the state of Iowa just purchased our documentary for all of their Ag-Ed programs in the state. The reason for that is because our film is a good educational tool to discuss different types of agriculture. I hope to reach different FFA chapters all around the country.

**Peter:** When did that audience idea dawn on you?

**Graham:** With this whole new grassroots distribution that’s happening with documentary, they say that you often don’t know who the audience is for your film until you go out and screen it. It’s sort of like throwing spaghetti against the wall. There’s a little bit more logic to it. The typical path with documentary distribution is that you apply to Sundance, you apply to Toronto, you apply to the major film festivals, you cross your fingers or you know someone and then if you get in, then you hope there’s a bidding war for different distribution companies and then you have a premiere in New York or Los Angeles. If it does well there, it’ll reach more markets and then you’ll go into DVD sales. There’s not much of a direct interaction with your audience. When we finished our film, we said, “You know what? We don’t care what the people at the festivals think of our film. It doesn’t really matter. What we care about is what the farmers think about our film.” So we took our film to field day at Polyface Farms in Virginia and we had 1,500 farm families there. We did four screenings over the course of two days. We had a wonderful launch to our film at the very epicenter of this alternative agriculture in our country.

From there, we actually had a number of people that said, “We’d like to host a screening in North Carolina,” or “We’d like to host a screening in Iowa,” because people come from all over the country to this place. Then we went to Iowa and we did screenings all throughout the state of Iowa. We had screenings that we had food together before the film, we had the screening of the film and then we had a conversation with farmers in that region about the issues that the film brings up.

We were in Iowa and I had one of those transformative moments where I went to the Iowa State Fair and I had these big dreams of just setting up my laptop and some speakers and playing the film for the audience at the Iowa State Fair without any permits, sort of under the radar. It was a massive failure. I screened the film—like a couple of people just streamed by our booth. Pretty much no one stopped. I just wasted ten dollars on parking and a couple days of my life. Then Donna, who was kind enough to let me borrow her booth, which was through one of the wonderful organic organizations in our country whose acronym I can never remember, said, “Maybe you should just go out and talk to people instead of trying to play the film so they can watch it when they’re really just interested in eating fried butter or whatever it is.” So, I left the laptop and walked around the Ag hall in Des Moines and I happened to go to the FFA booth. It happened to be that the state advisor, which is the person who is pretty much running FFA for the state, was the one at the booth at that time, Dale Gruis. First I waited for about ten minutes because he was talking to someone else and then I said to Dale, “You know, we’re having a screening tonight in Des Moines at the Fleur Theater and I’d like you to come.” He was very skeptical. He asked if it was a PETA movie. I was like, “No, it’s not. It’s just a dialogue about agriculture.” He asked, “How do I know?” I told him who some
of the panelists were. Rich Degner, who is the executive director of the Iowa Pork Producers Association, and Chuck Wirtz, who is a commodity hog farmer and is in the film, they were both on the panel that night. He knew Rich and he said, “Oh, if Rich is on the panel, I know this is not a film that is going to be alienating conventional agriculture.” Dale brought three FFA state officers. The way that FFA works is you actually have high school students in leadership positions. Michael Martison, Lindsey Calvert, and I believe Patrick Diedrich, I now know them all personally, they came to the Fleur Cinema in their FFA uniforms and they watched the film. Dale called me or sent me an e-mail and said, “We were in the parking lot for 45 minutes after we watched that film talking.” They were so excited. These are young people, young farmers. They were just thrilled about the film. Dale said, “We want to get this film to our FFA chapters.” So, I said, “Alright.”

That was sort of a moment when I realized who are audience is. I didn’t really know who our audience was. I just thought it was people that ate or something like that. People that eat are part of our audience. I think our core audience, the people that need to see our film, are specifically young people that are considering a career in agriculture because our film can show you in a balanced way some of the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of production that you’ll go into.

**Peter:** So, by deciding to have a certain sort of integrity in your treatment of conventional agriculture, you lucked into an audience that was plausible and receptive and just the right sort, for your overarching political objective, which is to make some kind of change in how agriculture works.

**Graham:** Yes, basically once I spent time on the farm with conventional farmers like Johnny Glosson, Sam Talley, and Chuck Wirtz that are in our film, once I spent personal time with those people and I realized how good those people are and their families are, then I realized that I wasn’t going to do anything that would make them upset when they watched the film or say anything. I wanted to show the challenges that they face and really see it from their perspective. If you’ve had a family farm for 100 years and suddenly all of your customers go to the grocery store instead of buying from you directly, you don’t have a choice. You either have to get out of it or you have to sign a contract with a big integrator. There is no other choice, especially back in the ’80s. Now there is another choice. These farmers that are raising most of the meat that Americans eat, a lot of them got into this situation without much of a choice. They either had to get out of agriculture and stop raising food or they had to sign a contract.

Our film focuses on the farmers and showing the challenges that they face and then promotes a system that allows farmers to get more money of the food dollars that we all spend.

**Peter:** One thing that keeps coming up in your film is the desire of farmers to pass it on. I imagine you’ve heard that a lot. They want the next generation to have something. I expect a lot of the developments in agriculture make that feel very doubtful. I’m wondering what kind of conversations you had about how agriculture could be carried on to the next generation as you got to know these people.
**Graham:** It’s such an issue. For almost every farmer that I talked to, the generational transfer of their farm is just central to their existence because you have been working your whole life to keep this farm going, your mother and father kept the farm going, their mother and father kept the farm going, and so how are you going to keep the farm going? The problem with conventional agriculture, and it’s actually the great strength of conventional agriculture as well, is its incredible efficiency. Chuck Wirtz would talk about when he was a little boy and they would have two or three-row cultivators. For those of you who aren’t aware of agriculture, a cultivator is essentially something that makes sure that the weeds don’t grow up. They would have 2 to 3-row cultivators. They would have to go with this machine up and down 2 or 3-rows of corn or soybeans or whatever it is that they were cultivating, wheat. Now, a couple years ago, there was a 24-row cultivator. You can imagine that if you have a machine that can do 12 times the amount of work that a machine when Chuck had when he was a little boy. It has gotten that efficient. You are going to have 12 times less people, 12 times less schools, 12 times less grocery stores, 12 times less hardware stores, and 12 times less small towns in our country. The problem with conventional agriculture is its great strength, which is that it is incredibly efficient and incredibly technologically advanced.

What’s the solution? Well, what a lot of farmers are doing is they’re actually getting into organic production because it is more labor intensive and that will create jobs for the next generation, not for some ethical reasons or anything like that. It’s very pragmatic. It’s more labor intensive. You have more of a premium. You get more money so you’re able to create jobs. A lot of farmers are finding if they want to make a successful generational transfer, especially if they have more than one kid, because that’s another issue. If you have five kids in a conventional farming system, you need five times the land that you have currently. Now if you switch to an organic production model, like you have at Polyface or any of the other wonderful farms that are doing that, you suddenly have a lot more work that needs to be done. When you go to the grocery store and buy a Perdue chicken breast, that farmer will get eight cents of the dollar that you spend. If that chicken breast is five dollars, the farmer will get forty cents of that. I don’t know if my math is right in that, but they will get eight percent of that food dollar. When you have that type of a situation, the reason why farmers get such a small percentage of it makes sense because Perdue provides all the chicks. They just drop them off and then Perdue has a truck that takes them to the slaughterhouse, which is Perdue’s slaughterhouse, which then takes it to a packaging facility, which is Perdue’s packaging facility. They have a wonderful marketing team that lets you know about all of the different things that Perdue is doing. They have distribution relationships at grocery stores. So they’re doing most of the work, which is why the farmers only get that percentage of it. The farmers have to take out the loans and deal with all of the environmental regulations that come up. The farmers are getting squeezed.

The cool thing about this new agriculture that is showing up is that the farmers get 100 percent of the dollar. The reason why they get 100 percent of the dollar is because they suddenly do everything on that line of things. They have to do the transportation, they have to find a way to get it to the slaughterhouse, and they have to do the marketing. The bad news and the good news in that model is that it needs more people. Often you’ll find a farmer that doesn’t like talking to people, but you have a gregarious out-going wife who wants to do the marketing. Then you’ll create jobs along different lines. You have kids that are into marketing
or technology and they can do the website. You have kids that are not interested in talking to
people; they can do the raising of the vegetables or the animals. If you become that entire
vertically integrated thing as your own farm and as your own brand, you create a lot more
work and you actually get to keep the whole dollar. It creates jobs for these small family
farms in a way that the industrial side doesn’t.

Peter: In your experience looking at farm families and the next generation, is organic
production of the kind you just described making it interesting enough to hold the next
generation, given the cultural influences that people are running into just growing up in the
21st century?

Graham: Yes, that’s a huge challenge. A lot of times kids just want to play video games or
have a job where they don’t have to do a lot of demanding physical labor. Although I feel like
there is a shift happening on that level. The enrollment for agriculture at Iowa State
University is higher than it has ever been. FFA is the largest youth organization in the country.
You also see so many gardening programs and things popping up all over the country. I feel
like people are very interested in their food, where it comes from. A lot of people are
interested in growing some of it, maybe just having a tomato plant in the backyard or having
something on their balcony. You’re right. It’s going to be a challenge because it has been a
while since there have been generations that have worked as hard and are used to the farm life.
With that said, there are a lot of young people that don’t have jobs right now, that have able
bodies and minds and would like to do something that matters. Hopefully, we can take the
fact that you have the worst job prospects coming out of college in many generations and you
have this very rapidly growing market for organically produced and grass-based foods and
you can take that square peg and put it into the square hole. You can say, “All right, let’s
create jobs for young people that are interested in working and doing something rewarding,
and let’s heal our country’s agriculture.”

Peter: I grew up on the sort of farm in some ways is your ideal. They bought little tractors
when we went off to college. Before that, it was pretty much hoes. We were doing a lot of
vegetables and selling them locally. We had our own animals and we invented animal pens.
My father was possibly the worst carpenter in creation and was in charge of keeping animals
in pens by hammering boards together. They kept getting out. It was a bizarre juggling act,
but all of the stuff you’re talking about was also true about it. We had all the pieces and we
knew everything about the food. We knew the people who ate it and we knew their health
situation. My mother could say exactly what good her vegetables did to the elderly alcoholic
who came every week for vegetables. She could say, “We’ve been keeping him alive for ten
years now!” Things like that. The dream was there and my parents knew it. Fortunately, they
had another income. They had a teaching income to supplement this so they didn’t have to
make it on this little farm. They didn’t have the marketing opportunities that you mentioned.
One thing that kept me from thinking about farming was the lack of any sort of intellectual
challenge at that point. It felt like drudgery. I couldn’t see it as anything but drudgery when I
was 17 years old. Second thing was that physically it was hard at a level that I wasn’t willing
to take on. Third, and I don’t know that I was as conscious of that then as I was a few years
later, is it was dangerous. Farming ranks up there among the most dangerous professions on
earth. It’s partly because farmers keep taking the guards off of anything that has a guard on it
and skipping all sorts of little steps that actually might keep them safe, but nevertheless there are a lot of hernias. There’s a lot of people rupturing things and breaking things just because you get loads that you’re not prepared for. I’m wondering about that third point. You’ve had some years of watching farms. Do you think things have gotten safer?

**Graham:** I don’t have a frame of reference with the way things used to be.

**Peter:** I guess that is a crazy question. Let me revise it. Does it look like it is a relatively safe profession now?

**Graham:** No, I don’t think it does. I think that the people that farm have something in their blood that they can’t do anything other than farm. It’s a very risky thing to do, and I think that’s one of the things we need to change in the way that we all think about food. We need to stop putting all the risk on our farmers and we need to have these models like CSAs where everyone pays the farmer upfront and that way if there’s a hurricane or something and the farm gets wiped out, they’re not the ones that suddenly have to question whether or not their family farm will continue. As far as physical safety, just like anything else, after a number of years you know which pigs to stay away from. You learn techniques and ways of doing things. There is an element of risk and an element of unpredictability. I think that’s what’s so appealing to the people that go into agriculture is that instead of being inside in front of a computer where you may be doing things that don’t seem to be having an obvious impact on anything else, you’re involved in life in a very vital way. You are outside and what you decide to do will directly impact the land and yourself. That’s an exciting thing. As far as safety, I don’t think it is or maybe ever will be a very safe profession.

**Peter:** You have mentioned as you go along that there’s a romance to farming that farm kids get, but it is hard to pass on to non-farm kids. Maybe your movie has some hope of arousing that in people. Are you, by background, a farm kid?

**Graham:** I’m not. I grew up in the suburbs. One of my friends started a farm out in Long Island in the early 2000s and I went out and worked on his farm for a weekend and really enjoyed the experience. He hired me to work on his farm for every weekend during a couple of summers. It was the summers of 2007 and 2008. It was just a wonderful experience. Being outside, working with my hands, actually using my body to do something was something I really enjoyed. There were moments where I realized just how little I knew or was connected to food. We went outside and I remember we were harvesting potatoes with a pitchfork. I didn’t realize that potatoes grew underground. I pulled it out and I was shaking it out and I was like, “Whoa!” I just didn’t know that. Maybe I had been told it or something, but it didn’t really resonate because I had never actually seen a potato be pulled out of the earth and see the dirt come off of it.

I think that in our culture a lot of people feel disconnected from everything. They feel disconnected from their food. They feel disconnected from their clothes. They feel disconnected from their furniture. They feel disconnected from their homes. They don’t really understand where anything comes from or how it’s made. I think part of the reason why you have this resurgence in this local agriculture and why so many people are deciding to take a
portion of land that they have access to and put some seeds in it is because we are all hungry for connection. We are all hungry to connect to something and to know the story behind something because we don’t know the story behind anything in our lives. Food is probably the easiest way to do that in a simple way. It’s amazing. If you go outside and you take a lettuce seed and you drop it in the ground, it will grow in six weeks and you’ll have lettuce. It works every time or almost every time. It’s something where you can actually understand something about your life and where it comes from. That’s an exciting thing.

Peter: I’m struck in your story of your documentary by just how long you were able to spend with these people. It also sounds like the kind of success you had, depended on what you learned by spending that long talking to farmers, including farmers whose ways of producing you might have initially found distasteful or problematic. How did you manage to do it?

Graham: There’s a number of different ways to make documentary films. One way is that you plan everything out before you make the film and then you sort of schedule. I will be in Oskaloosa, Iowa from February 3rd to February 4th. The story we are going to tell while we are there is the story of Steve Richardson. I did this research and I know he did this thing. You show up and it is pre-produced. You get the stock footage you need to get and then you go. That’s one way of doing things. It’s a very efficient way and there are a lot of positive things about doing it that way. The problem is that if you do things that way, you can’t actually learn anything new. You go there with a preconceived notion and if they don’t fit into what you’re trying to tell and you don’t use that footage or whatever.

The way that I approached this film was that I went to those farms and I listened to them. If they told me something that I didn’t know, I would ask more about that. That’s why it took four and a half years to do the film because as I got out there, my perspectives changed so much in the making of the film. There are a lot of disadvantages to doing things that way. It is very unorganized. You have a lot of footage. It is very difficult to edit it together into something that makes sense. You end up leaving out a lot of things that you’re not sure at the time whether or not they’ll be important.

For me, it was very important because I didn’t understand the issues very well. If I would have just gone out there and shot for a day with Johnny Glosson, I would have never really gotten to know what the challenges that he faces are. I would never really have gotten to know who he was as a person. I decided to come down five, or I don’t know how many times I went down there. I went down there a bunch and I spent a lot of time filming with him and talking with him and his wife and his daughter and learning about the challenges that they really face.

Peter: Were you self-financing this stuff?

Graham: The money came from three places. One of them was from foundations. We got support from the MacArthur Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. We got money from private foundations through families that are passionate about these topics. I also accrued a decent chunk of credit card debt. Those were the three sort of funnels that went into the money pit.
Peter: I really want to get a picture of the kind of time you were spending. How long on a visit would you be with a particular farmer? What would the days be like? What was the shooting like?

Graham: It was different with every place. At Polyface, I would almost always stay with friends or family that lived nearby the farm. In Virginia, I would stay with my cousins and I would show up there and then I would go and film. Joel was unbelievably transparent. He said, “Go wherever you want. Film whatever you want on the farm.” He is very difficult to have much time with because he is so busy. You aren’t able to interview him at length. You could just talk to most people as long as you want. With Joel, you say, “This is going to be 30 minutes” and you know it is going to be 30 minutes. When that 30 minutes is done, that’s your window.

Basically, I would go down there and I would loosely have an idea of what I wanted to film. With the conventional chicken farmers, I would go down there and film when they dropped off the baby chicks, I filmed when they were about three weeks old and then I filmed when they were six weeks old. I was just trying to show the life cycle of the chickens. In an original rough cut, we actually showed the life cycles of the animals: chickens, pigs, and hogs. We took you from the hatchery to the slaughterhouse. Then we realized that wasn’t what our film was about. Basically it would be going down to a place, showing up usually at dawn because that’s when you have the best light and also farmers aren’t doing a lot of things at dawn. Then, filming them as they are working, I always told people when I was filming them that I didn’t want them to say anything or tell me anything. Just pretend like I’m not here. I would try and disappear as I was filming them.

I would ask them questions in a set-up interview type of way. Usually I would shoot before with them, then I would interview them on some of the curiosities that developed, and then after the interview, I would say, “He said that thing so I need to get a shot that conveys that visually.” There was footage before the interview and after the interview that was footage of them doing work and their sort of verite stuff, I guess. The interview would drive the discussion in that area. They would often invite me to meals at their homes, so I would often have meals with these farmers, wonderful conversations, and we did a lot of tours. They would show me around before we started filming and I would get a sense of how the operation worked and things like that.

Peter: My experience is that all the stuff I want is in the conversations where I don’t have any recorder. Do you run into that as a problem?

Graham: Sure. There are always moments where someone says something when the camera is off and you’re just like, “Wow, that’s such an incredible thing.” What I’ve always found and it is this weird phenomenon is when you then set them up in an interview setting and you ask them the exact same question, they say 180 degrees from what they said, every time. You can never recreate the things that people say because I don’t know why. It is some weird phenomenon of the universe. Whatever they said off camera stays off camera.
Peter: Never let anyone talk until you have a camera running. First rule.

Graham: Yes.

Peter: What percentage of what you shot is in the movie?

Graham: Well, about halfway through the film we were shooting on tape and at that point, we had about 120 hours of footage. Then the camera broke and that was because we were shooting on farms and there was a lot of dust and things in the air. Our camera broke so we switched over to an HD camera that was tapeless and would do better in the farm situation. I don’t have a way of quantifying the amount of hours of footage we shot tapeless. My guess is that it is in excess of 200 hours of footage. We have, I would say, probably less than a percent of what we shot is in the actual film.

Peter: Do you have any thoughts about what to do with the other 199 hours?

Graham: Normally, you would take some of the stuff and turn it into DVD extras or whatever. We decided not to do that. We decided that what we’re going to do is to take those incredible interviews that we had with people like Temple Grandin, Bob Martin, Nicolette Hahn Nyman, Bill Nyman, and lot of farmers all over the country that we talked to that didn’t make it into the film. We’re going to cut it into 50 two or three-minute videos and post them online and it will be this curated, interactive experience that people can have with the footage. The last thing we want to do is to waste all of the energy, oil, and time that we spent going out to California to film even though nothing in the California trip except for ten seconds made it into the film. We want to make sure that people can effectively use that footage and have a conversation about some of the topics that it brings up relating to agriculture.

Peter: You keep using “we.” What’s your team like and how do you work together?

Graham: It was a great team of people. It started off as an “I” in the first year or so when I was doing everything: shooting, sound, producing. Then Memo Salazar came on and Memo was absolutely integral to the film. He’s credited as the editor. He credited as a writer, first credit on the writing, and also a producer. Memo is a huge, huge part of why the film was able to happen. I would go out and shoot and Memo would be like, “We don’t have enough. We need more.” I would go out and get more stuff and then Memo would be like, “We don’t have enough. We need more.” At some point he was like, “Alright. We have everything we need.” Memo was a hugely important part of the process. A lot of people were, but the core people were myself, Memo Salazar, and then Ryan Nethery came on in 2010. He’s a cinematographer. He shot about half of the footage that is in the film. Ryan was on the road and he was also instrumental in putting together the story of the film. He was a producer and cinematographer and credited for the story. Ryan, Memo, and myself really made the film happen.

Peter: They “came on,” but how does a group like that come on? Is it like the Bremer Town Musicians?
Graham: What is that reference?

Peter: The story of all the animals that get kicked out of their families or are about to get eaten and they sort of find themselves together on the road. It turns out, although they are sort of useless where they are, they collectively make something.

Graham: The food movement is a simple way to find people that are passionate about things. I put out a posting on Craigslist looking for producers and then one of the producers that almost came on and I almost had no money to pay people, I don’t even remember her name because we didn’t have any contact after that, she left because she got a paying gig, but she was like, “You should talk to this guy, Memo. He’s a great editor.” Memo is a professional editor for Discovery, and he’s a very talented guy that usually gets paid a lot of money. Memo is very passionate about the food movement, and he saw the footage with Joel and he got excited about it. He came on in 2008 or maybe even earlier. He may have come on in the fall of 2007. He has been on the project a very long time. Memo, whenever he could, would work on the editing of the film and I worked on the editing of the film. Ryan was an intern at our production company, Leave It Better, in the spring of 2010, and he was a very gifted film student at NYU. I started hiring him in the summer of 2010 after he graduated to actually be a cinematographer. Ryan is a very young guy coming from academia. Memo came from the professional world.

There were a lot of other people. Alejandro De Onis is a producer on the film and Carlye; they were people I met through various, circuitous ways, who were passionate about food or passionate about film. That also really helped to shape the film. There were a lot of stories of people. The music was done by Alison Plante at the Berklee School of Music. Memo knew her and asked her to do the score with her class. She oversaw the score while her students who were in their undergrad years composed this incredible score that didn’t cost us anything and was truly remarkably done. There were a lot of stories of people being incredibly generous and helping us make the film come together. It was a big “we.”

Peter: I’m struck what changed your life and got you out of crime reporting was two artifacts: *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. You have this hope that your work will deflect other people from their lives of crime reporting or computer manipulating or cubicle sitting or whatever. I’m wondering, reflecting back on what moved you, what you have come to think about the direction of your work. Are you going to do more inconvenient truth? More omnivore’s dilemma? Something quite different? How will you think about changing lives?

Graham: I think a lot of artists in the documentary film world, a lot of people are like, “One year I’ll do something on dancers and the next year I will do something on agriculture…” and it’s sort of this wonderful way of creating different experiences for yourself as an artist and also learning a lot about different aspects of culture. I’m not taking that approach. My next film, I’m going to focus on agriculture and I’m going to focus on environmental solutions. The next film I’m going to do is called *Future Farmers for America*. What we are going to do is tell stories about young people all across the country, about the challenges that they face and the joys that they share. How are we going to get young people onto land that costs $20,000 an acre when they don’t have any money?
We’ve laid the groundwork with *American Meat* and we’ve gained credibility with a lot of agricultural organizations and we’re going to build on that foundation. My goal moving forward is to tell more and more stories through video about what people can do and what our culture can do to have a positive impact on our environment.

**Peter:** So you wouldn’t be averse to becoming the central curriculum for Future Farmers of America.

**Graham:** No, we would love to have our films endorsed by FFA. I think our films aren’t super artistic. You might say a shovel has beautiful lines and you could see it as an artistic image, but a shovel can actually move dirt from one place to another. I think that our films are kind of like a shovel.

**Peter:** I see. Dirt Moving Productions, the next name.

**Graham:** Yes. I see it as a tool and a way of starting a discussion, not this sort of free form artistic journey.

**Peter:** What have you learned from *American Meat* that you think will carry over to the next one? What are the sorts of starting points for “what I’m going to get to faster,” or “what I’m going to do more of,” or “what I’m not going to waste my time with.” That kind of thought that you have at the end of any project?

**Graham:** Absolutely, Memo said he’d be on board for another film, but only if it doesn’t take four and half years. I have to figure this out. One of the things that I am absolutely focused on is figuring out one of the central issues. The film *Future Farmers for America* is all about the challenges that young people face. So, land and the cost of land is going to be a huge issue that we tackle in our film because a lot of times young people don’t have any capital available. How do you get around that issue? We are going to look at some of the programs that are cropping up in our country to match young people with land that they can’t afford, but that they can start working on and maybe eventually own one day. We’ll look at a very targeted type of issue. What are the challenges that young people face? Of course, we’ll have a lot of the sort of human side of things. Why did they decide to do this? What is the thing that inspired them to do it? Is it because it has been in the family for many years? Is it because they decided they want to be outside working? We’ll try to be as efficient as possible, but be able to discover things.

The other thing that is in our favor is that two of those years, in 2007 and 2008, I had to take on other jobs in order to pay the bills, like production jobs, shooting and editing. Now we’re getting to the point where I don’t have to do that. So I can actually focus 100% of my time on these issues relating to these issues and to the documentary and to agriculture.

**Peter:** I imagine two focuses for what you’re doing. I’m wondering if you are thinking of both of them or one more than another. One is: you got somebody who already has the farming bug. They want to farm. How is it possible? How do you cross these practical
difficulties of finding land and finding capital, being able to borrow money, and stuff like that? There’s this other thing we talked about which is the romance of farming that is hard to catch outside of a farm. Are you aiming for conveying the romance or is it more a matter of talking about how those who already have the bug could get over the obstacles?

**Graham:** I think it will be a combination of both. We will definitely deal with the practical issues—like there’s a program called “Farm Beginnings” that the Land Stewardship Project does that you can approach and get land, or eFarmony at PASA that matches young people with land. We will look at tangible solutions that aren’t talking about romance for people who already have the bug. I am interested in those romantic stories because it is fascinating and I think people are interested in it even if they aren’t interested in farming themselves. They are interested in hearing about it and learning about it because there is something beautiful about being able to feed yourself and live from the land and that is something that people will have a connection to, regardless of whether or not they will be doing that themselves.