Jill Van Der Wal: Unlike a lot of other people who are farming, it wasn’t in the plan. It was happenstance. I married my husband after college and worked for two years for corporate Nabisco in sales, traveling the Midwest, expected my first child, which took me out of the travel game, and my husband took over work after he graduated. His work just eventually moved him over this way. I was a stay-at-home mom who was getting kind of bored and frankly depressed, and my dad was alone and needing help with the beef cattle and the farm, so I just slowly started helping him, and we ended up actually needing to move here for work. My parents offered that we maybe could incorporate and be part of the actual business. And when my children all entered school, I just kind of slowly went more full time and we just added more cattle and it just slowly evolved into the business. I’m kind of a today kind of person; I have a hard time looking forward for planning. It was just an evolution, and that’s how I came to be on the farm.

Peter Shea: What’s your operation like?

Jill: We have a very small crop farm. 500 acres is what we run. And that’s primarily corn now, because we feed cattle. We probably grow a little more corn than other people. We also have soybeans, but very little soybeans. And we have alfalfa, which is a third crop, which most farmers don’t have. They just have the two. If you have a livestock farm with your crop production, then you generally can add more crops and be a little more diversified because you need those forages. So we have alfalfa, and some people grow wheat, but we have alfalfa and then feed the balage and then get our straw from cornstalks instead. …And we have cattle, I’m sorry. In the winter months we can feed up to 750 head of cattle; that would be our max. And that’s actually, for a beef farm that’s really a small beef farm. We have a barn now that can house 400 full, but we only have about 60 in each pen instead of 100 in the summer for comfort. It’s a summer barn. Because of the way it’s designed, it has great airflow, it’s very narrow, and it has wonderful shade for cool, and we don’t use our outside yards in the summer because the heat is just too difficult. We have cattle outside in the winters. My father feeds mechanical feeding outside in what is the higher tech, what I call “higher tech” set up, and I feed with an old feed wagon to the barn, and that’s kind of how I like to feed and manage.

Peter: What’s your day like?

Jill: Very different, and that’s probably what I love the most about farming, for all of the things that are very difficult, there’s consistency that seven days a week cattle have to be fed, so I will get up in the morning, kind of get kids off to school, my husband leaves for work, and get the house as much in order as I can before I head out to feed cattle and then we feed, and then walk the cattle to make sure everything’s real healthy. If there’s a problem with health, we’ll have something pulled to treat it, and then depending on the weather, we’ll clean the barns, and re-bed cattle, up to twice a week in the winters, and less in the summers. Summers we do so much maintenance. This year we painted several sheds, including my parents’ home. We’re going to be tearing down an old shed that is really so obsolete and not doing well. And just a lot of maintenance in the summers, shingling and yard maintenance and grove maintenance and a lot of gardening in the summer. We have a very large vegetable garden. And that’s my day. Lots of wandering.
**Peter:** What kinds of hours do you work?

**Jill:** We pretty much work when the sun is up. But there’s a lot of variety. What I was telling you is that there is that consistency that you have to be up in the mornings to feed cattle every day but that’s done, some days you don’t have to clean barns and then I feel like I can make some decisions about what I do. And then because my personality needs a lot of adventure, I never feel that I have that drudgery schedule. Or at least I’ve been faked out to think I don’t. I have a lot of flexibility as long as I never plan anything, if that makes sense. If I schedule meetings and things, and the weather goes sour, or I plan something fun and the weather changes and we get non-stop snowstorms or rain or something, or the hay needs to be put up, then it’s like “Oh,” you know, it’s very stressful if it’s something that cost you a lot of money that you planned or if it’s something very fun and you can’t go. But as long as you don’t plan anything and I don’t have to leave the farm, it can be bits and pieces here and there, and I kind of maneuver through my day, and I really like that. If I have to be clocked in from exactly eight until five and I have to do exactly this, then I get a little bit crazy, so the variety here of each day, of not quite knowing what’s going to happen is just a really good thing for my personality. That’s what I like the most.

**Peter:** Do you have favorite activities?

**Jill:** …I don’t know. You know, if I were to say, “Oh I love to make hay,” well I don’t love to make hay. Making hay is usually a very horrible job. It’s usually, like last time it was 100 degrees. I think I almost had heatstroke twice. It actually was 110 heat index. The silo pipe kept plugging up so I was fighting with that between two hot machines, up against a silo in the sun. And it was just terrible! But you don’t have to do it every day. So it’s not making hay. I would say, “Oh I love to clean the barn,” and I don’t mind cleaning the barn, but if I had to do it every day, moving around manure, well who wants to play in manure every day? Well no, I don’t love that every day. But it’s peaceful because you’re alone, you have a lot of time for your own thoughts, so I find some peace in that job, as long as it’s not every day. When the weather gets bad, and I have to start doing it every day, then I start to get kind of crabby because you don’t go to college for four or five years and move manure around every day, as my father would remind me. …Favorite job? I like walking cattle. I really like to check that cattle every day, and I love to see that they’re healthy and eating well. There’s a lot of peace with the animals. I guess that would probably be my favorite thing: feeding and walking cattle.

**Peter:** Can you say just a little about what kind of attitude you come to have with animals, working with them day after day?

**Jill:** …I think you learn that you better adjust your attitude if you’re going to be personally ornery with them because that’s just not going to work at all. Genetics is much better than it was probably 20 years ago with livestock because the people who raise beef cattle—I can’t speak for the pork industry or those nasty turkeys, I think they’re vicious too, I don’t think they’re breeding those to be nice—but cattle, they’re breeding them to be nice because working with 1,300 pounds at times, when they’re fat, and in the case of on the ranch, much bigger cows, who wants to deal—it’s just dangerous to be dealing with bad attitudes, so they breed out problems. You just have to be really patient and quiet, and generally if you’re patient, things will go okay.
Once in a while, there will be a situation that is frankly just so bad, and I’ve only had like five in all my years here, where I’ve had to deal with an animal where I’ve thought I just don’t know how to deal with this while keeping the animal safe as much as possible, getting it to a place where you can deal with it, and not killing yourself or destroying a piece of implement or something. Those are—I’ve been in about five situations where I’ve thought, “I just don’t want to deal with this; I just want to walk away,” but you can’t so you do. And once in a while, there’s a situation where there’s an animal, and it’s in pain, so you’re just struggling to take care of it and not injure it further. When they’re that big, it can be difficult.

**Peter:** Have you escaped without injuries?

**Jill:** I have so far. One time I got my arm slammed against a feed cement bunk by a steer throwing its head. I was trying to help it. And then you step back, and you realize there’s no rationalizing with this animal. So you just have to think really carefully before you act, so you don’t. My dad broke his leg once really bad. The steer kicked back on him and caught him right in the shin and broke it completely off. I’m just really afraid of what they can do, so I really try to be giving enough distance. My dad is phenomenal. He has no fear. And he’s gotten kicked in times where I think, “I don’t know how you keep walking.” Because I’ve gotten kicked many times where I’m gone, I’m down, I’m passing out from pain. And I don’t know how he does it. He has a very high pain threshold. He can handle a lot. My husband once got kicked bad enough that he passed out and hit his head, and we had to take him to the ER. But for the most part, we’ve been very fortunate with injuries, but it can be very dangerous, and I know a lot of people who have had—we try to design our facilities where we treat and vaccinate to be like Temple Grandin’s structures, and most people are doing that because it’s just too difficult otherwise for everything, for us, for the animals.

**Peter:** How much of your operation is pretty much just you, and how much is cooperative? Are you largely working alone?

**Jill:** No, my father works alone a lot because I have the kids here, and he was alone my entire life. If one of us isn’t working, it’s usually me. And there’s a lot of guilt from me for that. I’m just not naturally mechanical. Of course, he’s not overly mechanical either, but he still can get it done. There’s a lot of things I just can’t do alone because I don’t have the knowledge. The crop side of it, I’m just not highly interested. We have a crop specialist who helps us make decisions like all of our inputs, what seed to purchase. He does soil sampling so we know where to plant what—manure management plans so that we know where the manure needs to be and where to back off. So that’s a huge asset. He comes with so much knowledge and experience, and he’s so passionate about what he does that I can back off of that too. I listen in but he and my dad… So, dad and I just kind of get into a cycle where now in the summer, we just have the barn, so he’s been loading most mornings, and then he parks the tractor, and then I’ll come out and I’ll feed. And sometimes he’ll beat me out to the barn, so he’ll feed, and I’ll go out and walk with him like I did today. It just depends on the job. Haying, it’s two or three people to keep things moving. It depends on the job. To give you a percentage, I don’t know, but my dad works more alone. So if it’s only a one-person job, then quite often it’s dad doing it. He’s going to be 72, and things are going to have to change. I feel the pressure.
Peter: So there is a bunch of that stuff you’re going to have to learn?

Jill: I know I need to push myself harder. It’s so easy to play the role of daughter and get caught up as mom and wife. And there’s all the traditional roles that I grew up with. I had three brothers, and I ended up here, which is so bizarre. That’s why I’ve been telling you this wasn’t in the plan, and my father would tell you this wasn’t in the plan. But he used to tell me, “Why don’t you go to the house and help your mother?” And now I tease him and say [laughs], “I bet you wish you didn’t tell me to go to the house and help my mother.” But some of it, a lot of it, is just flat interest. It’s hard to get good at something you’re not interested in, and I’m not passionate about certain aspects of the operation. I love the cattle. Luckily that’s the largest part of our operation. Then there’s all these decisions about chemicals and seed, and I just need to be thrown into it. Dad needs to back off. Because when I have to do something, then you step up and you get it done. But I’m afraid there might be a day of reckoning if I don’t step up and push myself a little harder.

Peter: You’re in an interesting marriage. Your husband’s a banker, right?

Jill: Correct.

Peter: So the farmers and bankers—the farmers and the ranchers in Oklahoma—[laughs]. How does that work out?

Jill: Really well because he comes with so much—He was a beef nutritionist, and then he moved into beef consultant, which put him into the financial end of the business. He’s heavy with our marketing, so I always tease him that he’s the brains and I’m the brawn, which is so sad. [Laughs] So sad, but true. He and my dad do the marketing, which is another aspect that I’ve backed off. I tend to—I always call myself the clean-up hitter because it’s like if there’s a lousy job nobody else is doing, and I see it, it’s like, “I guess I’ll take care of that,” because everybody else is doing the important stuff, like marketing and fixing equipment. I’ll run around picking up bags and sorting scrap metal, pretty much dumb-head work.

Peter: What kind of decisions need to get made for marketing?

Jill: That’s tough. That’s the everyday. That’s the heart of the operation. Because now margins are very tight, and there is so much money in funds because it’s out on the market, so anybody can get in on buying and selling. Sometimes when the stock market is weak, everybody wants to get into cattle and futures, so basically the beans or corn, and then they can just—it just makes the markets crazy. So, especially as a small operation, we have to constantly be hedging or just have a plan. You have to have a plan. You have to stick to it because you could otherwise just lose your shirt. That is so, so important—so integral to the operation.

Peter: What are the sorts of things that you actually have to settle? When you sell, who you sell to, or is it an insurance matter? I mean, how do you—what sort of thing do you decide?

Jill: You need to know if you’re going to buy crop insurance, and you better have it purchased before the date it’s due because otherwise you can’t get in. And we buy crop insurance because
we couldn’t handle a complete loss. That would just take us under. Before we buy cattle, we may hedge. We set what we need for a corn price. And again, I’m not doing it myself. We work through a company that does these transactions for us, so we’ll call and say, “We need a put,” or “We need a call,” or “We need to hedge this or that,” to make sure that we are protected. Like when we buy our cattle in the fall, we have to know what our break-even is. We have to know when we’re buying the cattle at the price we’re going to spend, we have to have a break-even that we’re going to absolutely meet and hope, hope that we can lock in a profit at that. I can’t get any more technical, sorry, than that with you. It’s just not my area of expertise. I’m trying. I’m trying to learn.

Peter: How unpredictable are cattle? You get the unpredictability of the market, but then matters of how much they gain, how much illness you get, stuff like that. Have you got that down to a science?

Jill: We purchase our cattle in the fall from a buyer—we have two buyers. We have one out in Montana that we have been buying from since my grandfather started—or his company we have been buying from since my grandfather started buying cattle—back in the ‘30s and ‘40s I believe. At least since my dad came out here. And we have an understanding, he knows cattle, and now the cattle that we’ve been getting from Montana every fall, we’ve been buying consistently since I’ve been here, so we know what to expect from their genetics. We know what our rate, our gains, should be. And we keep tweaking our vaccination program, and that has really helped. We went three or four months last summer without having an illness, and that’s just phenomenal, so when we can keep those costs down, our death loss to zero or very little, then we can do okay. Those are those variables that matter so much. These summers, this heat just shut those cattle down. They don’t want to eat. You feed them early in the morning, you feed them late at night, and you hope for the best. But again, we plug all those things into our formula before we buy, very conservatively, so that we don’t get stuck in a very bad situation. It’s just a big plan, way ahead of buying. But we know, we try to know what we’re buying. It’s very important to know who you’re buying from.

Peter: You mentioned vaccinations. What kind of decisions are you up against for vaccination?

Jill: We work with our local veterinarians, and we know what problems we’ve had with illness in the past. A year or two ago we added one more vaccine, and that is when we were able to just really—vaccination programs I think are so vital because it can just take you to almost no need for antibiotics in a perfect situation. But it can really reduce your illness, and that, because medicine is so expensive, so expensive, and so time consuming. When cattle are healthy and the weather is good, feeding cattle is just a breeze, and when the weather goes south, and the cattle get sick, then it’s so much work. It is just painful. So keeping them healthy, starting them out with a good vaccine program. And that’s expensive, but it pays for itself in the long run if you don’t have to pull out those expensive antibiotics.

Peter: Are you vaccinating them against pretty much anything they could get, or is there a line—

Jill: No, against the known things. You know like… Do you want to know the specific illnesses?
Peter: Well, I’m just wondering if—it’s news to me that there’s—

Jill: There’s even a vaccine, Peter, for overeating.

Peter: Really? Okay.

Jill: Yes, and that can be a real big problem. Overeating can lead to all sorts of other illnesses. Nutrition is so, so important because a beef animal’s rumen, when that’s not functioning properly—basically if their bugs get off, and you know how you get a stomach ache? If their bugs get off, they can get so sick so quickly, and that’s why it’s so important to keep the pens well-cleaned, well-bedded because if there’s a ruminate that cannot lay down, their rumens will not function without them being able to lay quite a bit of the day. If they’re not able to lay down, their rumens won’t function, and they will get sick. So all those little things just really add up.

Peter: The reason I was pressing on vaccinations is that when I go to my own doctor, it seems sort of cut and dried. There would be a couple of things that are a question, but by and large, she knows people my age need pneumonia, and probably you should get hepatitis for shingle recurrence and a couple of things like that, but there’s not a big question—

Jill: Yeah, it’s—Yeah, it is very similar, Peter. It is very similar. It’s kind of like ours now. “Do you want to add this? Have you been having problems with that?” But for the most part, there’s what we call a five-way, and that just vaccinates against these five basic things. So very much like—But animals are like 50-year-old people, so they’re babies, and they’re vaccinated like babies. You give them this, and that protects them against—we’ll call them childhood illnesses, animal illnesses that are just very specific to beef cattle.

Peter: You mentioned your college education a while back, and this line from your dad. How has that done for you—the college you had, the education you had—given the life you ended up with? [laughs] Would you take something different? Would you do something different? What kind of things were useful?

Jill: I could easily say that I should go back. I had switched into animal science the beginning of my junior year I believe. I was a retail business major, and I just thought, “I don’t think this is where I need to be. I think I’m going to switch to animal science.” I did that first semester, and realized I was never going to graduate. And I said, “Switch back to business, it’s a marketing degree. Get your business degree and get out.” And I did that, and I have no regrets. I don’t. If I started over, would I do animal science? I don’t know. I’d probably do something totally different. But it was business, it was a business degree, so it’s certainly usable here. I think college just gives you a basic... It gives your mind an opening to opportunities, to possibilities, more than it gives you a real great knowledge of chemistry or a real great knowledge of animal nutrition or whatever. You know those things you just learn, whatever job you’re thrown. I think college just gives you this ability to put yourself out there and realize that there’s just all these options and opportunities, and maybe it’s just this willingness to try something new and think differently. I would never not get my degree. It isn’t an option for my children. Or so we’re telling them. [both laugh] They’ll probably prove me differently. [Laughs]
Peter: No, you’ve got to start bad-mouthing education, [Jill laughs] and playing up sex and drugs. [both laugh] They’ll turn into the best-educated mutts in the world.

Jill: And maybe that’s what I need to do with number three. That’s working—so far the whole no option is working great for number one and two. We’ll see what number three is going to do. So no, I’m sorry, I would not change. I wouldn’t change it.

Peter: When you went to college, you were thinking—obviously you were thinking business. You had very different dreams for yourself.

Jill: But I told you, I’m a very here-and-now kind of gal, moment to moment, can’t really grasp five, ten years. So I went to college because my father didn’t really give me an option besides pumping gas at the corners. And I thought, “Well, college sounds fun.” So I just grabbed a degree that was in my favorite activity in 4H. I thought clothing and textiles—sewing—that was my favorite thing to do, so I grabbed that major in college. It just—I wasn’t—it was just a continuous evolution. I just didn’t really think about what I wanted to do even after college until graduating was getting close. It was just, “Got to get a job, so get your degree.” I would have never imagined I’d end up here. Never.

Peter: Did you think it wasn’t a job for a girl?

Jill: I grew up with a lot of strong women around me. There’s a lot of chauvinism in the home in many ways that I didn’t think about. My mother played a very traditional role — and yet she got out there and did what needed to be done. My grandmother hated housework, hated all of that, and had only two children. They were so insistent that my mom and uncles studied and did all those things. My grandmother wanted to be out. So she was always out pushing wheelbarrows and doing whatever, and I think growing up in the ’80s, you just kind of—there—I mean that was post-women’s lib. I just thought that women did whatever women wanted to do and never, never saw that kind of—until I got into the corporate world and saw the glass ceiling. Then I started experiencing the sex—the abusive situations that women could get in, and never experienced that in college. Because in college and high school you could do whatever you wanted. You could play ball, you could—even if you had girls teams and boys teams, you could still do whatever. I wrestled in grade school. I had three brothers. I didn’t like dolls because the boys were playing football and baseball. I just had to do what the boys were doing if I wanted to play together. So no, I just never thought about this as being something… But I was needed, so you just did what you needed to do. So it wasn’t a conscious choice… I just didn’t think about it… I hope that answered that.

Peter: Yeah, it’s fine… As you’ve done this job all these years, are you willing to say unequivocally now that it’s as much a woman’s job as a man’s job?

Jill: I think, I think I’ve been proven wrong, because I did come into it thinking, “I can do anything a man can do.” And then every once in a while you hit the wall where you realize, “Ok, physically we’re more limited.” My grandfather was a very slight man. He was my height and I’m thinking he probably didn’t even weigh—he probably didn’t hardly weigh what I weigh at his peak work time. My grandfather loved technology and learned how to use it because he
physically didn’t have the stature that a lot of farm men have. But he got the work done, and…
I’m sorry, what was the question?

Peter: Just that, are you still willing to say that women can do anything a man can do? [overlap]

Jill: —No, and again, I’ve been in situations where I’ve actually been in tears because there’s a power take off where I’m alone and I have to hook it up. And my dad could just pick that up, and he could do it. And he would struggle a little, but for me, it’s like I have to learn other ways. And that’s the other thing, my dad is a “get out of the way, I’m just going to pick this up, or push it.” And I’m having to say, “No, I’m not picking up that plow.” I mean, literally, he would say, “Pick the disk up with me. We’re going to hook this up,” and I’m like, “No, I’m going to get the loader, I’m going to get a jack, I am not wrecking my back on this.” So I’ve just had to say there’s other ways. With technology it’s just not as physical as it used to be. And as far as pitchforks, on the rare occasion that I have to shovel, which we do once in a while, or load a wagon by hand because something broke, I can get that done. But I have now come to a point where I realize there are differences. There just are. But there are other ways of doing it than how men traditionally do.

Peter: There are a lot of wrecked men on the farm, though, too.

Jill: Mhm, and I have many times said, “I give. I don’t think I can do this,” or “I don’t know how to do this other than how my dad does this,” because you learn by the example of what you saw. And I have to stop and go, “I can’t.” Or when a steer needs to be rolled over because he’s stuck, literally, and he’s going die in minutes if you don’t get him rolled back onto his—where he can get up on his feet, and I’m just in tears because I think, “I just don’t physically have the snuff to do this.” So then you’re calling, and you’re running, and you’re just taking every bit of adrenaline that you have. But I’m of good stock [Peter laughs], so it’s not I’m just this tiny little, petite, 5-foot-3 and 110 pounds… I just keep reminding myself that I have—what I give up up top, I have down below, so I have learned to use my legs. [Laughs] You learn your way around.

Peter: We’ve alluded to your stay in the corporate world before you came back to the farm. I’m curious what that was like.

Jill: I don’t miss that. I started in the first recession in ’91, and I was so grateful for a job. All I had was Dad, so I had a little company car, I had an expense account, I had a paycheck that was amazing, especially in my major where I was starting at maybe double what some of my counterparts were starting at because they stayed in actual retail, and I went into—with Nabisco. I was a very happy woman, but it was—I couldn’t motivate for that job. I liked the travel. There was a bit of variety that way. I would go eight weeks in Bismarck, four weeks, Des Moines. I would be all over—Detroit—but it just seemed… For me, it was meaningless. I just don’t care that much about crackers. I just couldn’t get passionate about it, and so after a year and a half and a baby being born, I just looked at my husband and said, “I keep looking up to where you could go, and I don’t want to go up. Up looks even worse than where I am. [Peter laughs] So I think I need to find a new place.” And then my son was born and I was traveling, fly out Monday, fly back Thursday night at best, and I thought, “Well, this is not going to work.” So it was a blessing that I was traveling that much because then it was a forced get-out. So, no, I never
miss—and plus, I was saying, I started during the first recession, so how many months after I started, they started doing what they’re doing now. They started hatcheting all their middle management people, and then they start hatcheting everybody over 55 or whoever’s been there longer than 20 years. Then I found out after I resigned that they got rid of absolutely everyone in my district. They found a way so they could start afresh with lower-cost people. That was just a really good way to leave the corporate world. It’s made me not miss it ever, ever, even on really bad days, I don’t miss it.

Peter: You can paint a real picture of what this is. It’s easy to feel the texture of it, but I’m just curious, what are the hardest things about the life?

Jill: I told you how much flexibility there is. There really isn’t. [Peter laughs] Seven days a week, cattle have to be fed, and we know—we were refilling cattle this spring before some of them had even sold, so there was never a day off. Now we have my parents over there. Now I’m starting to look at the future. [Laughs] I’m old enough that I’m starting to think about ten years, and I’m thinking about my dad at 71, almost 72, is not wanting or physically can’t do this anymore, and my son and daughter and next son are gone, we could be stuck here alone. [Peter laughs] And we could never get away. The livestock is so difficult to think about. I’m a kind of content person. I need a lot of my own time, so I’ve adjusted to that, but I want to at least be able to plan something, and I think that if we’re ever alone alone, I think we may not buy cattle anymore. I just don’t know how I could do that. So you’d have to have somebody else. You’d have to have—I don’t know—something. That’s the hard part, that inability to plan a lot of things. Like weddings, we have two weddings this fall, and they’re at the beginning of harvest, and harvest can start in early September. This year, the way the drought is [claps], and some years, it can go up to Thanksgiving. We’ve finished Thanksgiving week. How do you—? And if it has to go, sometimes you need 10 inches of rain, and if you don’t do it when the time is right—So it has to be something really big for you to just say, “Not going there.” So that’s the hard part, Peter.

Peter: Have you gotten vacations?

Jill: Yes. We just take them. We went to D.C. again this year. We’ve gone to Miami to meet my exchange brother. We’ve gone to San Francisco. So we have traveled, and once you have that life, I don’t want to not. And when my kids are gone, I keep thinking, “If they graduate and don’t come back here,” which we’ve never told them, “You should stay local,” I think, “How are we going to get away to see them again?” Things will change. Right now everybody comes here. My parents’ house is big; they built it so that everybody can come home. So the gang all comes home for the holidays. They come to us….We’re grateful for anyone who’s willing to come to us. [Peter laughs]

Peter: This issue of the kids came up. I just talked to somebody the other day who is shaping his whole operation so as to make it attractive to his kids to take over. Kind of making it, “If you’re interested in sheep, you get sheep.”

Jill: That’s—yeah.
**Peter:** And I’m wondering—for him, that’s really important, that what he has built up stays in the family. How do you feel about that?

**Jill:** In some ways, it’s difficult to think about moving on, and I think about it now. I’m getting older; I’m starting to think about these things finally. We’ve never—we don’t run our business about making room for the next generation. I don’t want to put that pressure on them, for one thing. I just don’t. We’ve always told them, “You need to first get out, get your education, experience something away from here. You don’t know anything but this.” And then we say, “After graduation you’re going to be gone for a while. You’re not coming home, and you have to do a study abroad. No, we will not run—we’re a small operation, and we will—I’m not. I don’t know, I can’t speak for my father. He’s very quiet. I really don’t know what goes through his head. But from my standpoint and my husband’s, we’re running this business as a business and making decisions about what keeps it the most profitable and… No, not doing anything based on emotions that way, just to try and keep—but it is hard once in a while because I’m living in the home that my father built for my grandparents, with the year I was born. And my parents are over there in the house that I was born and raised in, and when we remodeled it the last time and took down the wall, I see my great aunts’ names etched into the beams, and I think, “Oh my gosh, all these relatives who started here.” And I feel that responsibility at some level, and then I pack it away and say, “No, this is a business.” I think when it gets too personal, then bad issues can start. When people feel this, “I have to keep this in the family. I have to keep this for the next generation,” then there’s some scary things that start happening, I think. Just a lot of family issues, lots of pressure. That’s my personal opinion. I don’t know, I just don’t want to do that. What’s here is here; if it works, it works. Everything evolves, it changes. At some point this will change; it will no longer be, so I’m not going to force something. I can only make decisions based on economics and what works. They do have their 4H projects though. We’ve made room for that. So we have five pigs on the farm after thirty-some, five, forty years because my last son decided he thinks cattle are awful. He wants pigs. We get to eat good pig—pork—and he gets to have pigs.

**Peter:** You eat pretty well?

**Jill:** Oh yeah. The 4-H projects keep us well fed.

**Peter:** I’m thinking about a million people so will likely watch this—

**Jill:** —A million who don’t know me.

**Peter:** Yes, yes. But somebody out there might be pretty attracted by a bunch of what you say. I’ve known people who, they want to do something physical. They want to do something with variety. They want to be in a beautiful place.

**Jill:** Have they smelled the air out here? [Both laugh]

**Peter:** You mean the day you spread or the day after you spread?

**Jill:** Or any day that’s humid or the wind’s in the wrong direction or we clean the barn.
**Peter:** I can see this attracting people, and I think one of the things that’s going to come up immediately for anybody who’s attracted to your life is: apart from—what am I going to do out there when I’m not working? Is there anything for me to keep me alive?

**Jill:** The University of Minnesota did some research and said, “Southwest Minnesota”—this was five, six, I don’t know, maybe longer ago—“Southwest Minnesota would be the most economically advantageous place for businesses to develop.” But they aren’t, because of the lack of cultural opportunities. We have small rural theaters… It’s kind of like living in a sitcom. All of us are. We’re just characters out here. And I know there’s characters in the city, but it’s different. You’ve got to be content because you can’t go out for sushi, so you either learn to cook well or you like what’s out here. And it’s not that we don’t have good restaurants out here; we have some places that do their own micro-brewing, but there’s just less variety. You just have to find it, and appreciate what is here. There are things here, but it’s not the same. It’s a tradeoff. There’s huge tradeoffs from the city life to here, both directions. This is just quiet, horrifyingly quiet for some people. [Peter laughs] No lights at night. My nephew lives with us every summer. He was born and raised in St. Paul. Loves cattle, loved to show cattle, and finished his freshman year of college, was back living with us, working for the University of Minnesota Extension outreach center in Lamberton, and on the weekends, he finally came to my—this summer, the second or third weekend he was here, he just looked at my daughter and son and he goes, “I don’t get it. Don’t you have any desire to go do something? It’s just so boring here. Don’t they want to go do anything?” And I’m like, “No John, they’re just happy to be with us. Aren’t you?” [Both laugh] No, he had a big, diverse group of friends, and they went out, and he was in college so of course there’s just nonstop social opportunities, and here, it’s quieter. So you’d better like each other.

**Peter:** Somehow I don’t imagine you as a particularly retiring person in college. My guess is you had a reasonably active life.

**Jill:** Yeah. But I love my husband and my family, and I do have good friends. There are great—it’s just, getting done with work and planning something, and I told you, I kind of quit planning things because it just got to be depressing when you have to cancel. But there are times—I will say—there are times when I’m extremely content when we have people coming. Harvest is a great time. Harvest was a wonderful time because it was social, and we did it with another family, and that made it a very, very, very difficult time of the year because of the hours. It just gave it that fun thing because you were working with other people, and it was very social. But yeah, it’s a tradeoff. You just have to, at some point—I watch a lot of movies, foreign films, just escape to go somewhere else, another time, another place.

**Peter:** You mentioned harvest, and that raises something I’m curious about. What is the contour of your year? What does it look like? You must have times that are pretty hellish where you’re
working all the time, and it’s frantic, and if you do anything wrong, it will screw everything up, and if the rain comes, it will screw everything up.

**Jill:** Yeah, one year we had ten inches of rain as we were just beginning. And I of course thought—I mean, it was flooding out here; it was just ridiculous that amount of water, and I thought, “That’s it!” My pessimism came in, and I thought, “We’ll never get the crop out.” I don’t think it was a week. It just shut off, and we were back in full fledge, and the sun came out, and, “Oh, ok.” But… every year is so different because of the weather. You feel the fall coming on when the locusts come, and that first north air hits, and you could hear the corn. So there’s that, and yet it’s just… I don’t know. I just don’t think about it that way I guess. I don’t know if I fully understand the question; I’m sorry.

**Peter:** You have harvest from early September a lot of the time?

**Jill:** Yeah mid-.

**Peter:** Mid-September.

**Jill:** We’ll start doing a lot of the corn silage. That’s very early. For people with livestock. Everybody else would be pushing late, or maybe October 1. That would be really middle average.

**Peter:** I see, so it starts getting middle of September; it might run to Thanksgiving.

**Jill:** Correct.

**Peter:** You’re really busy, and then what’s that winter like? Is it just maintenance?

**Jill:** Yeah, winter’s probably in that way more routine, more quiet. You get up, you feed the cattle, but the years where it’s just nonstop snow dumping, that’s where I get really crabby because all you do is move snow, and all you do is clean yards and haul manure and bed cattle. That can get to be really drudgery. For people who—my dad grew up on a dairy farm. He didn’t hardly leave the colony as a kid. You just couldn’t go; the day was so long just getting the cows fed and the milking done. It’s what they did. And that lasts all the way till spring, and then planting and shipping starts.

**Peter:** When do you buy cattle?

**Jill:** We buy cattle in the fall, so they’ll come in usually when harvest is starting, so that’s a crazy time of year.

**Peter:** Oh, so you get the cattle in and the harvest started at the same time.

**Jill:** Cattle are in and the harvest is usually full blown, and then vaccinating when we’re not harvesting, and we’re getting everybody settled. And then in the spring, about the time planting starts, we’re shipping [Peter laughs], shipping those cattle.
Peter: What are the dates for that?

Jill: We’ll start shipping cattle early April, mid-April, maybe late March even through April, and then early May. That month, we’ll start sorting off the bigger ones, and ship them, and we’ll start planting.

Peter: And planting runs—what are those dates?

Jill: Corn, April. Ideally you want it all in in April because once May 1 hits, seed people get excited because you know that your productivity is going to—you’re going to lose so much every day after May 1. You’re going to lose bushel capacity, potential. So it will start as soon as you can get the ground temps to where they need to be in April, and when insurance will let you put it in, hence you could collect if it freezes off or something freakish. Then people will go…

Peter: You’ve got planting and when does that finish?

Jill: Ideally, May 15th. For beans and corn. Corn, April; beans, May. Boy, when we’re not done in June, people are getting excited.

Peter: What happens between the end of planting and the beginning of—essentially, the hot months of summer?

Jill: Spring, crop checking, maintenance. Lots and lots and lots of maintenance, whatever needs to be done. Like I say, every year I’m amazed: there are fences to be rebuilt, there’s shingling to be done, there’s hay to be made. Every month, we put up hay. That’s at least two days, plus cutting a day or two depending on breakdowns. Spring, just trying to keep weeds in control. That’s a huge—managing weeds. Huge. And that’s always evolving, changing. What the weeds are, what’s controlling, that’s where the crop consultant for us is such a…

Peter: At this point, what have you got for animals? You’ve sold off most of the—what do you keep over the summer?

Jill: We bring the cattle that we brought in the spring. Ours all come from North Dakota in the summers. And there’s about 66 head times four, per pen. In the winters, we can up it; there can easily be about 100, not quite. 100 per pen, so 400.

Peter: You’ve got animals that come in the spring and then when do they—

Jill: —They’ll leave when the new ones come in September.

Peter: So you’ve got a short-term animal season and then a long-term animal season.

Jill: These are yearlings that we bring in in the spring. They’re larger; they’ve been backgrounded for a little while, maybe on a pasture or something. The calves that we get in the fall from the ranches in Montana? They’re babes; they’re little 300, 400-pound calves. They come in, and they’re just weaned. They’re called weaned calves. They’ve been weaned, and then
they ship them. This year they want to ship them earlier because they’re so dry. Very dry, the pastures out in Montana are. They’re back to their dry cycle like we are. So yeah, that’s our rotation. Everybody’s different. Some people are shipping fat cattle right now. Large feed yards are always shipping. They’re just always bringing in new. But we have a two-cycle deal.

**Peter:** That gives you a year you can kind of count on… Last question: I hear a lot of sad stuff about agriculture out here. Various kinds of sad stories. How do things look to you? Do you feel hopeful about operation like this?

**Jill:** You have to be. There’s a lot of people to feed, and the economics drives so much of it, but the reality is there’s just so—I’m hopeful. My son is going into agronomy at Iowa State, and that’s the, like, best agronomy school, we’ve been told. He’s just so excited about it, and he says, “I’m just excited to develop something that potentially could help alleviate starvation.” I know that’s really a political thing, but it also is a production issue. We’re going into where there’s a lot of droughts around the world, and we have to find better ways to feed people.