**EPISODE TITLE: Crossroads: Work in Rural America**

**EPISODE DESCRIPTION:**

Rural communities today are at a new crossroads—a meeting point of ideas where they can chart their future. In this episode, we're exploring the past, present, and future of work in rural American through the voices of everyday people. First jobs, hard jobs, odd jobs, unusual jobs, ancient jobs…these storytellers have seen it all.

**EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:**

[Introduction]

[Music plays - Floorboard blues]

**Kid in Eagle River, Alaska:** Oh, my. I don't even know where to begin actually.

**Cozad, NE Hay Days:** Growing up in a small town has its good times.

**Charo in Euless TX:** My father was a Charro, and I was an Escaramuza. A Charro is a Mexican cowboy and an Escaramuza are the girls who would ride sidesaddle and perform. So my father and I would saddle up our horses and we would ride to San Jose Mission, Mission Espanada and just talk and learn about our past, our ethnicity, our culture, all while on horseback.

**Laura and Kelly - Matawan, NJ:** Hi! This is Laura and Kelly, and we're from Matawan, New Jersey. [Laughs].

**Lawson, MO:** Ok, in my small town, we had a movie theater. We had a bowling alley called the Bowl and Bun, which was really a lot of fun. We had a swimming pool.

**Eugene, OR:** In Eugene, Oregon, sports is really big.

**Eagle River, AK:** Actually, you guys won't believe this, but it's true. I live in Eagle River, Alaska, way up there. It's really cool up here, and it's kind of cold.

**Orange Mound, TN:** Well, I'm eighty-five years old, and I retired as a principal with Memphis City Schools after 43 3/4 years from the system.

**Wien, MO:** That's the way we learned to dance when we were young back in the town of Wien, Missouri.

[Music fades out]

[Sound of cars going down a country road]

**Hannah:** *Welcome to rural America. It's been shaped by many people, starting with the thousands of Indigenous communities who were in many cases forced to leave their ancestral lands. It was shaped by immigrants who came in search of a better life as well as free and enslaved African Americans.*

[Sounds of a farm in the morning: birds, roosters]

*Throughout the 19th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas. They built their lives around the work of harvesting what the land could produce—food, fuel, fiber, ores, and minerals—all crucial to a growing nation. They built communities at rural crossroads—small towns that became centers of commerce, politics, and culture.*

[Sounds of noises from cars on a small downtown]

*The early 20th century brought large-scale change: as urban populations grew, economic investment and political influence shifted from counties to cities. Since then, the pace of rural change has only accelerated.*

*Today, rural communities are at a new crossroads—a meeting point of ideas where they can chart their future. And over the next three episodes, we're going to hear directly from people in these communities as they reflect on their lives and the places they call home.*

[Heartland Nights theme song plays]

*The stories you're about to hear were collected at various points of the last decade as part of Museum on Main Street. Museum on Main Street is a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. For over 25 years, they've brought Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asked the people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own.*

*As the Crossroads: Change in Rural America exhibition tours rural America, these audio stories continue to be collected by volunteers and submitted by everyday people. They're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the people that make up our towns and cities.*

*Welcome to Smithsonian's Stories from Main Street. I'm your host Hannah Hethmon. I'm joined on this episode by my co-host, Bobby Harley, who will be adding his own small-town perspective to these stories.*

**Bobby Harley:** *My name is Bobby Harley. I grew up in rural Blackville, South Carolina. Growing up, I developed a love for community and history. This led to me pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in social studies education at South Carolina State University, a historically black university in Orangeburg, South Carolina.*

*I like to compare my life to those great educators who came from rural places like Mary McLeod Bethune and Booker T. Washington—the former being from South Carolina. I currently teach in Charlotte, North Carolina, but rural America will always hold a special place in my heart. Everything from its people to its climate made me who I am today.*

*Blackville is a town that captures the essence of rural America: work ethic, hope, community, and perseverance. I can recall picking watermelons and cantaloupes during the summer and attending church, where I was introduced to the negro spiritual. Rural communities sit at the heart of America. These spaces serve as a reminder of where we come from and the work that needs to be done.*

[Music fades out]

**Hannah:** *In this episode, we're exploring stories about work in small towns.*

*Hard work—starting at a young age—is a common experience for many of our storytellers. Memories of first jobs are something city dwellers and rural communities share, but which jobs are available say a lot about how small towns are different from urban areas…and from each other.*

*This senior storyteller shared memories of his first jobs in Lawson, Missouri:*

**Selling magazines Lawson MO:** When I was a kid I sold magazines. I knew everybody in town. We had 3,900 people and I knew all of them, even the dogs, cause I sold *Liberty Magazine* and *Saturday Evening Journal* and one other—I can't think of it right now. I picked cherries for a dime a gallon, I shoveled snow, and I was a fry cook at Jack's Shack Restaurant for $2 a week and my meals. Went in the coal mining when I was 11 years old, worked one day and got a quarter for that. Told Dad I'd never go back in again.

[Sounds of cicadas]

**Hannah:** *Nan Snider remembers picking cotton in Arkansas in the 1940s:*

**Nan Snider [Selections from two stories]:** The children, as they got bigger would wear—they would pick cotton in a little, maybe a corn sack. Mama would carry... She would tie... Well, actually, she sewed on a little strap, and they would, well, maybe until about five or six, they'd use that. They get a little bigger, they would put a strap on a 'to sack—or a potato sack—and they would pick in that. And then finally, when they got big enough, they had their own pick sack.

So my goal for the morning was to make 76 pounds, my first weigh-in, because it got lighter as the day went on because my sack was wet in the morning from walking through the field. And so by the end of the day, if I could make 300, I'd  get $9. And I just thought I was so rich, and I would dream of the things that I could order from the Sears Roebuck Catalogue. And I had just almost all the pages memorized. My favorite pages were the men's underwear pages, I think, but we just loved all the things we could get through here, our dresses, our blouses, makeup, just anything.

**Bobby Harley:** *Farming was also the family livelihood for John Cousar in Chester, South Carolina, who was interviewed on the job in 2017 at the Chester Farmers Market, still selling his crops at 78:*

**John Cousar:** You're looking at a sharecropper's son. You're kind of young, but you may or may not know about sharecroppers. So that just means I've been farming since I was a child with my parents. And now, I'm doing it for myself. It was at a time when a great amount of cotton was being—cotton is still growing in South Carolina, but at that time, it was high volume.

**Bobby:** *Sharecropping is a tough job, but John went on to turn farming into a lifelong career through education and networking with other young Black farmers in his community.*

**John Cousar [Continued]:** Of course, part of that time, I was a high school student. So I was able to see all this close-up and kind of master it with the agriculture studies. If you see the signs behind me on the wall, it has an NFA sticker there, a logo. That's the New Farmers of America. The New Farmers of America is a counterpart of the Future Farmers of America. The only difference, Future Farmers of America at that time, was only white students. New Farmers of America was all African-Americans. So I was in agriculture for four years at Finley High School, here in Chester.

**Hannah:** *Like Nan and John, many of our storytellers' first workplace was the farm or the ranch.*

[Sound of a tractor in the distance]

**Rural Nebraska:** I grew up in rural Nebraska, and my first job was working on my family ranch. I worked a lot of years on my ranch without getting paid at all. But the summer I was 13 years old, I finally got a paying job in the hay field. I had a little gray Ford tractor with red fenders and a little sickle bar mower that I pulled behind it. My sickle bar mower wasn't very long at all. I had to go around and around the field many times to get it all mowed down. I remember wanting really badly to get a suntan and ended up with nothing but a sunburn. I remember enjoying my money from my job a whole lot, because I sure had put in a lot of hours just earning my keep, as my dad said. I loved my little tractor, it always started up for me. But one thing I did not love about that job in the hay field was the sweat bees. They'd get up under your arm and sting the crap out of you. Overall, though, I loved my job in the hay field. I did that for four summers, all through high school, along with other jobs, like a job at the grocery store in town, and babysitting, and a nanny job over in the neighboring town. Growing up on a ranch sure makes a kid turn out to be a hard worker."

**Bobby:** *Holding down multiple jobs, side jobs, odd jobs...that's something a lot of folks still experience as they do what they have to to make ends meet. Whether it's your first job or your tenth, sometimes you just have to take what's available.*

**Sue N - Pinedale, WY:** My name is Sue Nichols [laughs]. No, when I was seventeen I cleaned motel rooms. Everybody else got good jobs and I was stuck cleaning motel rooms for one dollar an hour. Whoop-de-doo. So it was normal cleaning rooms, and it was owned by an old couple, and they didn't get around very good. But anyway, during hunting season, we would have pheasant hunters come from around the city, Kansas City, and I would get to clean the rooms after they left, and invariably, one or two of them would clean their pheasants in the bathtub! And, that was not nice, not nice at all. No, so that was my first, but then my girlfriend, she became a librarian after she graduated from high school, and I had done that when I was in

high school. She got the job. She got the job waiting tables. I cleaned people's pheasant puke up! [Laughs] What's wrong with this story?

**Waterville, ME:** As a high school student in the, this would have been in the late sixties or early seventies, I worked summers at the local newspaper in Waterville, Maine. I was an inserter. What an inserter is is a job that probably doesn't even exist today. It's the person that used to put the sections of the newspaper together. You do this night after night for three or four hours and I think we got paid about 85 cents an hour, and you had the roughest sort of people ever that you could imagine. These were the people that probably couldn't find work anywhere else mixed in with kids that want to go on to college, so you had quite a collaboration of folks. It was a rough group. I remember one day that somebody actually threw somebody through a window because they got upset with them.

**Telephone Operator - Chanute, KS:** I was a telephone operator in Chanute, Kansas, in 1960 and ’61 when they actually went dial. And, it was very interesting, and I did night relief, so I worked from midnight to six in the morning by myself, and you ran the whole town’s telephone service, and it was the old days where you plugged in a number and said ‘number, please,’ and they gave you a number and you rang it.

**Frank Morrison - Big Piney, WY:** My name is Frank Morrison. My first job was when I was about 14. It was right after my mother passed away. There was a funeral home that opened about two blocks away from my house, and I went down and applied, and I worked the front door, and I showed people where to go and what rooms to go visit people in, taking flowers in. Consequently, it got me shunned by a lot of people at school [small laughs] but that was my first working experience.

**Bobby:** *My first job was picking cucumbers. We didn’t have much growing up, but we did have each other. I remember my sister and I picking cucumbers to help my mom pay the electric bill. Children helping their parents is a common theme in rural communities. My grandmother, for example, dropped out of school to assist her mom.*

[Short musical transition - Heartland Nights theme]

**Bobby:** *In areas without any established industries, you sometimes need to create your job if you want to stay in the area and find meaningful work.*

**Seth Sullivan - Boone, NC:** My name is Seth Graham Sullivan and I was born in Morganton, NC on May 12, 1985. How’d you end up owning a restaurant? I worked in restaurants kinda

through college and I found that I had a knack for it and I also really enjoyed the work. Basically in this area you kinda have to make a job, there is not a lot of industry and I really like it here. So I decided some years ago that that was the course I was going to take with my life. Then opportunities presented themselves and I jumped on them.

**Pat Onstad - Quality Bait & Tackle - Detroit Lake MN:** We just bought the bait store in July of last year. John and Glenda Store were the previous owners. John was a longtime friend of our family and they wanted to retire, and we thought it was an important part of our community and we didn't want to see it close.

[Sounds of a port]

***Hannah:*** *When the Crossroads exhibition came to the port town of Rosedale, Mississippi, local students interviewed port staff, a professor, and a farmer in the community about opportunities in the area and what the port means economically. Here are a few clips from their documentary:*

**The Power of the Port, MS:**

Robert Matthews: History of the port: Bolivar County, which is the county we're located in, decided that they needed to have a port. We did not have one in the past. They selected a site along the river. They decided to develop it into a port. They petitioned the federal government for money. The federal government, this was during the Ronald Reagan years, said yes they would give them the money if they could find a plant that would, or a facility, that would locate in the port.

Niha Singh: Rosedale, within the U.S., is in the bottom 10% of towns economically, so there are definitely a certain set of struggles that folks in Rosedale face. And there are a number of reasons for that. But it could be doing a lot better.

I think, at present, some things we can think about are just a lack of businesses in the area. So, not enough, which leads to not enough jobs, which means people don't really have money to spend. So, that means that services that people might purchase don't really exist in the area. So, you'll have a limited number of companies moving in on both sides of the market.

Roderick Funches: We feed people. We grow soybeans, and we'd use a lot for soybeans for a lot of different things for a great purpose. If you would look around to grow, harvest. That's what we do. We grow crops. That's how they handle their business, through them, through selling their grains. It goes to the port. For the road there, right? [crosstalk] Yeah. It goes to the port

road. They're all asking me all the... You got [inaudible], but we're closer. And that's where they do their business. It says it's right across the levee.

Farming's not really for younger people. I would like to say that. It's just things we have to do around here. It's all that's left to do. [inaudible] I would say.  We ain't got many jobs around here, and then the vacancy we do have people just hurry and jump on them.

Robert Matthews: This company is owned by its employees. We have an ESOP program, which means Employee Stock Ownership Plan. So, the money that this facility makes after all the bills are paid, any profits that are leftover are returned to the employees. Therefore, our employees, we've had a real good run, so they have been able to pocket a lot of money. And that money doesn't stay in their pocket. It goes to the grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, keeps that going. We have those 100 people who work here, they have to go to Double Quick and buy lunches. They go to the sporting events here. They sponsor their kids who are playing on sports teams. They buy cars. There's a new car lot here in Rosedale, probably because Cives is here. There's a lot of different things that they can do with their money. It's not to help just Rosedale, but it also helps Bolivar County altogether because they get their paycheck, usually go to Walmart and buy groceries, or Kroger, or wherever. What we pay our employees doesn't stay in their pockets. It gets distributed out over the community here and over the county.

[Sound of cars on a small town street]

**Bobby:** *In rural Barnwell County, most of the industry has left. After high school, most people worked for the local plant, Duncan Grills. I remember my mom watching the Price is Right and beaming with joy after seeing one of their grills featured in a showcase. People in rural America take pride in their work and community. The money we spent was distributed back into the community as well at stores like Piggly Wiggly and restaurants like Dukes Barbecue.*

**Hannah:** *When change leaves communities out of work, new industries and facilities like the Rosedale port can bring new jobs. Another approach taken by rural Americans is to reinvigorate and support traditional work, like farming. In North Carolina's Watauga and Caldwell Counties, volunteers did long-form interviews with new farmers and old farmers trying new things.*

*Next up, you'll hear from a young couple, new farmers who use horses to plow and sow on their organic farm.*

**Kara and Jacob - Deep Gap, NC:**

Kara: I'm Kara Dodson I live in Deep Gap, NC and really it's called Triplett or Elk by local people.

Jacob: I'm Jacob Crigler, and I'm from Radford, Virginia. We are organic produce farmers. It's a new thing for us, we've successfully made it through one growing season.

Interviewer: How did you decide you wanted to be organic produce growers?

Kara: It was really kind of my motivation to start in 2014, I knew I needed to leave my desk job, it was kind of driving me nuts. I grew up with horses, I grew up driving horses, and knew I wanted them to be part of my life. So that's when I decided, if I'm going to quit working at this non-profit, what do I want to do next? And it was like, well if it's a blank slate I want to farm, and I want to farm with horses specifically.

Jacob: At the end of the day growing the vegetables is the same it ever has been from the dawn of time I guess [laughs], you put the plants in the ground they grow, you know and you take care of them. But our approach has changed as we learn more, as young farmers learning from other farmers.

[Sound of cars on a small town street]

**Bobby:** *Also in North Carolina, interviewers talked to Valerie Midgett, whose work revolves around another ancient tradition, but one that's relatively new to North America:*

[Gong/Tibetan Singing Bowl dings]

**Valerie Midgett - Boone, NC:** Neighborhood Yoga opened in Boone, 12 years ago, almost exactly 12 years ago. We literally opened in my backyard, that's why it's called Neighborhood Yoga. We built a small studio at the top of the hill in my backyard, which is just a block from downtown and started there. We started with a conditional use permit and just taught a few classes, had a couple of teachers besides myself, really small intimate classes, and over the years it has grown and we outgrew the space, and if we really wanted to grow into a bigger business and reach more people we needed to move out of the neighborhood and really become a part of the downtown community. And that is what we did two years ago, we renovated this building, which is a 100-year-old building and moved into this space.

But this third floor was really underused; it was an underused space in downtown Boone, and that was a real interest of mine in finding underused spaces and reinventing them, and trying to

hold true to some of the original architecture that’s here but at the same time update it for my needs.

It was an interest of mine and to also have a place for people to gather, local people, not just tourists downtown but a reason for local people to come downtown and to gather even after five o’clock. My hope is that we are just a catalyst for more businesses offering that.

[Sound of cars on a small town street]

[Merges into sound of canoe paddling]

**Hannah:** *For the Mdewakanton people of Prairie Island Dakota Community in Southeast Minnesota, one way of finding work that sustains means a return to wild rice cultivation and harvesting, which has been practiced by their people back hundreds of years. This also means protecting the health of their waterways, one of the few place where wild rice grows.*

**Art Owen - Wild Rice Planting MN:** There’s a number of people who are going to harvest. So they are getting all excited about that. Wild Rice right here in our backdoor. That is pretty good. To work in the river back then that is the way you survived. That’s why siŋkpȟétata [muskrat] is so important too. Everything we had came off the river. The otter, fish, turtle. Our ceremonies like tonight, we will have will probably get done about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning.

The most precious thing on earth and that’s water. We need it, you need it to survive. Anything in the future. Not just saying thank you all the time for it but to constantly [think] how are you going to keep it clean? What laws are you going to change to keep it clean? And what are you going to do with your programs to make sure that water quality is where it is at for your people. Man make things hard. They make it difficult. When it is very simple. The earth was meant to be simple.

**Bobby:** *The environmental and economic challenges facing rural communities across the country are real. But themes of hope, innovation and collaboration run through these stories too. Here's father and son Jake and Randy Willet, who are fifth and sixth-generation farmers in Iowa.*

**Randy & Jake Willrett - DeKalb County, IL:**

Jake Willrett: You always have to be able to adapt. That's what you need to be able to do in this industry. You can't be afraid to try or change. And like my dad always says to me, and I'll always remember is, “You're only limited by your own creativity.” Dad is the experienced one. He has seen a lot more than I have. So I came into the farm and I just kinda took on the role of learning as much as I could from him, from those experiences, and incorporating technology into the farm.

If you ask me, what is my favorite part about being an organic farmer, it's working with our organic community. Agriculture in general is better off working together. I'm just really proud and really happy to be part of this industry. I'm proud to be part of change. It's hard to predict what's gonna happen in agriculture. The future doesn't scare me, the future excites me. Because I am an organic farmer, I can say that. Cause I know a lot of people that have a different opinion. A lot of conventional farmers are scared of what's going to happen. But I'm not.

Randy Willrett: Back in the '90's there were several of us neighbors, three of us, today there's over a dozen. And I'm in hopes that in ten years they'll be two dozen. Maybe someday, we'll all be doing it this way. I hope so.

[Heartland Nights theme plays]

***Hannah:*** *Thank you for listening to these stories. I hope they inspired you to think about the past, present, and future of rural America. Whether you yourself live in a small town or a big city, we’re all connected and we have in more in common than you might think.*

*If you have a story about life in rural America that you’d like to add to the Smithsonian compilation, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting museumonmainstreet.org/stories. That’s museumonmainstreet.org/stories OR you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That’s the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full compilation of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street’s education projects.*

*To hear the full version of the stories in this episode and see a complete list of story credits, check out the description for this episode in your podcast app or visit museumonmainstreet.org/podcast. Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in*

*this episode. And to all the Museum on Main Street collaborators who helped collect these stories.*

*Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources and programming to small towns across America through their own local museums, historical societies, and other cultural venues.*

*These exhibitions are designed to engage communities and become a catalyst for conversation about life in small-town America, to start dialogs, build excitement, facilitate connections, and open doors to your community's history, culture, people, and sense of local pride. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibits and learn more about the program at museumonmainstreet.org.*

*A special thanks to the PEALE team, Heather Shelton and Nancy Proctor, who have been instrumental in gathering and curating stories for Museum on Main Street.*

*This episode was produced for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service by Better Lemon Creative Audio. It was produced, written, and edited by me, Hannah Hethmon. Additional writing and narration by Bobby Harley.*