Cultivating a Legacy: Exploring Inheritance and Succession Planning Strategies on Intergenerational Family Farms in Rural Georgia

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ABSTRACT

While the majority of farms in the United States are family-owned and operated, the number of all (family and nonfamily) farms, the number of family farms, and the proportion of farms that are family-owned continue to decline nationwide. This trend affects the economic and social makeup of rural communities and fundamentally shifts the agricultural landscape in the United States. Succession, or the process of selecting and educating a younger family member or members in preparation to inherit the farm, is a key factor in the continuance of intergenerational family farms. This project studies the succession process on family farms in rural Georgia which have remained owned and operated by the same family for at least two generations. Using qualitative data collected from eleven semi-structured interviews with intergenerational family farmers in the state of Georgia, this study explores family farmers' process of taking on responsibility on their family farms and how these same farmers structure their approach to planning to pass the farm on to the next generation. The study first finds that at each step of the succession process, familial support is crucial to supporting farming as a career. The study further finds that family farmers' own complicated emotional relationship to farming, as well as family farmers' dual roles as parents and farmers, introduce contradictory strategies in each farmer's approach to the succession process. These contradictory strategies, in addition to considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and maturity of potential heirs, can destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm at any stage of that process.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, it is well-documented that the number of farms is declining. In the mid-1930s, approximately six million Americans self-reported as full-time farmers; in 2000, that number had fallen to just 750,000 (Wuthnow 2015, 2). This trend is easily observable in more recent years as well: since 1980, the number of farms in the US has decreased by over half a million, and between 2017 and 2022, the number of farms fell by one hundred thousand (Baethge 2024; EWG 2024). Small or medium farms (those with total value of sales less than $100,000,or with sales between $100,000 and $500,000) and family farms saw the sharpest decreases in the number of farms between 2017 and 2022, compared to other size and ownership categories. During the same five-year period, average farm size increased by 5%, and the number of farms with farm sales greater than $5 million nearly doubled (EWG 2024; Zimmerman 2024). Furthermore, although non-family farms and farms which are owned by a family but rely extensively on labor provided by hired workers, contract workers, and other operators and their families, make up a combined total of less than 15% of all farms in the United States, these farms account for over 65% of the country's agricultural production (ERS 2024; MacDonald 2014). Evidently, United States agriculture is trending away from these small family farms toward larger consolidated family and nonfamily farms.

At the same time, however, the majority of farms in the United States today are classified as small or medium-sized family-owned farms, meaning they are owned by the producer or by individuals related to the producer and rely primarily on the labor provided by individuals related to the producer (USDA 2021; MacDonald 2014). Since family farmers make up the vast majority of farmers in the United States, changes to this section of the agriculture industry can have far-reaching ripple effects concerning food security, rural-urban demographics, rural land use

patterns, and agriculture as a social institution in America. Not only do family farms make up a major section of the economic base in rural communities, but the cultural dynamics of these communities can also be altered as farming families leave to seek employment elsewhere or as external entities buy and develop that farmland (Wadley 1982, 478). Furthermore, many current family farmers own, lease, and operate land that has been passed down through multiple generations; the continuance of these farms carries significant emotional importance to farmers and farm families.

Central to the family farm is the question of succession—the passing-down of a family farm from one generation to the next. The process of succession is not simple or quick; rather, it is a lifelong process of learning to farm, choosing to farm, and gradually taking on personal responsibility, financial responsibility, and eventual ownership of the family's farm. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to understand family farmers' process of taking on responsibility on their family farms and how these same farmers structure their approach to planning to pass the farm on to the next generation. Through analysis of qualitative interviews, I investigate how family farmers navigated the process of inheriting the farms they live and work on and how these farmers are approaching the process of planning to pass their farm on to the next generation.

In response to the investigation regarding the process of inheriting a family farm, I find that familial support is absolutely crucial to the decision to farm on a relatively small scale. Beginning early in their lives, farmers develop an affinity for the farmland and farming lifestyle as well as a certainty that their role as family farmers is valuable and meaningful; they also acknowledge the difficulties of farming as well as their uncertainty that this career and lifestyle will remain viable and meaningful in the future. As they begin to prepare to pass the farm on to

the younger generation in their family, farmers must balance the goal of passing on the family farm with the goal of ensuring a secure future for their children and loved ones.

These internally conflicting goals cause farmers to employ contradictory strategies; these strategies, along with considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and maturity of potential heirs, complicate the succession process and destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm. At any stage of the process, this destabilization can cause the succession process to encounter minor or major interruptions or, in some cases, to ultimately fail.

In the sections that follow, I show that family farm decline and the changes in farmer demographics in the United States as well as in the state of Georgia specifically, where this study was conducted, demonstrate that the study of farmers' approaches to family farm succession is especially relevant. I examine previous research on causes of structural farm change, motivations for farmers to continue farming, the importance of succession for farm resilience, and financial and career decision-making, and I explain my decision to investigate farmers' subjective understanding of the farm succession process by collecting and analyzing semi-structured interviews. Finally, I present the data gathered from these interviews, discuss the farmers' complex relationship to farming and how the contradictions within their perspective on farming are reflected in their approaches to succession planning, and argue that these contradictions are not completely resolved by the outcome of any individual family's succession process.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Agricultural data collected over the last several decades show that the number of all farms is declining, and that the number and proportion of family farms is decreasing as well. This trend is observable in both the United States at large and specifically in the state of Georgia,

where data collection for this project took place. The United States Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years, collects comprehensive data on farms and ranches in the United States and the people who operate them. This census reports that from 1997 to 2022, the total number of farms in the United States decreased by just over 14 percent, while the number of farms classified as family or individual farms (compared to farms classified as partnerships, corporations, or "other", a category which include estates or trusts, prison farms, grazing associations, American Indian Reservations) decreased by 16 percent (USDA NASS 2024). During this same time period, the total number of farms in the state of Georgia decreased by 20 percent, while the number of farms specifically classified as family farms decreased by 25 percent (USDA NASS 2024). In 1997, farms classified as "family or individual" made up 86.8% of the farms in the US, and 88% of the farms in the state of Georgia; in 2022, these numbers had fallen to 84.7% and 83.6% respectively (USDA NASS 2024).

As the number of farms in the United States has steadily decreased, the number of physically large and economically super-productive farms has increased. From 1997 to 2022, average farm size increased by 32 acres, and the number of "very large" farms—2,000 acres or more—increased from 74,426 to 83,308, an increase of nearly 9,000 very large farms over just 25 years (USDA NASS 2024). The number of farms in the highest category of value of sales—$500,000 or more—also increased from 1997 to 2022 by over 100,000 farms (USDA NASS 2024).

Furthermore, the ability to make a living as a farmer in the United States appears to be decreasing. According to a study conducted by the University of Missouri in 2023, the number of farms in the United States on which the principal operators depended on off-farm occupation as their main source of income increased from 37% in 1974 to 56% in 2017 (Krohn and Spell). The

simultaneous growth in the number of very profitable farms and the percentage of farmers whose main source of income is sourced from off-farm occupation indicates growing stratification in agriculture in the United States.

The average age of a US farmer is nearly 60 years, while the number of active farmers below 40 years is in overall decline (Lally and Mars 2024, 560). While the number of producers ages 65 and over increased by 12% from 2017 to 2022, the number of farmers between the ages of 35-64 decreased by 9% (Lally and Mars 2024, 560; NSAC 2024). These figures are countered by a modest increase in the number of new farmers and farmers aged 25 and under; however, the increasing average age of farmers indicates that succession planning efforts are of particular importance, since farm succession is the means by which intergenerational family farmers introduce younger farmers to the agricultural workforce.

The shifts in United States agriculture—the declining number of small family farms, the growing prevalence of very large, non-family farms, the reduction in farmers' abilities to make a living from their farms, and the increasing average age of farmers—raise questions about the means by which existing family farms remain viable. Succession is a key part of the continuance of a farm; if the process of the farm changing hands from one generation to the next is successful, that farm remains a viable family farm. If succession is not achieved, then the loss of that farm contributes to the declining number of family farms, and the sale of the land may contribute to the growth of larger farms.

By interviewing current family farmers who hope to pass on their family farms, I investigate the actions of family farmers within this context of farm change in the United States, including—potentially—how farmers' awareness of agricultural changes influence their approaches to the challenge of preparing the next generation in their family to inherit their farm.

Understanding how current farmers approach farm succession allows us to understand the factors that make planning for the future of their family farm difficult, which in turn contributes greatly to an understanding of the factors that can make family farms resilient in the face of agricultural change.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To examine family farmers' process of inheriting their family farms and the strategies they employ as they structure their approach to succession, this project poses three research questions:

1. What role does support from older farming family members play in helping prospective heirs learn how to manage a family farm, establishing an heir's emotional connection to farming and farmland, and allowing the heir access to enough financial support to make an early career in farming viable?
2. What strategies do current family farmers use to identify potential heirs and educate, prepare, financially support, and encourage their prospective heirs to inherit the farm, and how do farmers' characterization of and reaction to economic factors such as input costs, availability and affordability of land, and stability or volatility of crop prices influence their approach to succession planning for the future of the farm?
3. What character traits or aspects of identity do farmers consider relevant or necessary in a potential heir, and how does the search for these traits contribute to or complicate the succession process?

These questions represent the questions that farmers implicitly engage with throughout the succession process. The topic of each of these questions—familial support, strategies used by current family farmers, and character traits considered necessary in a potential heir—provides an

opportunity for the succession process to succeed, to encounter major obstacles, or to fail. As heirs themselves, farmers first encounter familial support as an immersive introduction to family farming; later, as adult farmers, they begin to build a plan to identify an heir and pass on their farm. As they proceed in the succession process with whatever amount of success they experience, they inevitably must consider the character traits that they deem necessary for a potential heir, must measure their identified heir against these criteria, and, if the situation calls for it, they must decide whether or not to compromise on these ideal qualities in order to proceed with passing down the farm. At each step of the process, farmers' methods of engaging with these questions can complicate, enable, or impede the succession process; by investigating these three questions, I will explore and explain the strategies which aid the process as well as those which create obstacles or complications to family farm succession.

As I analyze farmers' experiences and strategies during the inheritance and succession processes, I focus on the key contradictions inherent to the process—specifically, farmers' conflicting positive and negative associations with farming, as well as the tensions between their dual roles as parents and as family farming mentors. Family farmers find significant meaning, purpose, and enjoyment in farming as a career, and report a deep attachment to the lifestyle and to the land itself. At the same time, however, farmers recognize the difficulties and abiding frustrations inherent to farming, and they are unsure that family farming will remain viable, meaningful, and enjoyable in the future. Farmers' love for farming, frustrations with farming, and anxieties about the security of farming conflict all inform the succession process. Furthermore, family farmers often simultaneously occupy both the role of the parent and the role of the farming mentor in their relationships with their potential heirs; these dual roles can bring conflicting aims to the succession process. As a parent, these farmers aim to ensure stability and

security in their children's future, while as farmers, their goal is to ensure the continued family ownership and operation of his farm. These conflicting goals form the basis of my analysis of farm inheritance and succession, since these internally conflicting aims develop into contradictory motivations and strategies which can complicate or impede the succession process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project aims to investigate how family farmers inherited their family farms and how they strategize and prepare to pass their farm on to their children or other younger family members. Here, in order to later discuss how farmers engage with input from the broader agricultural landscape as well as input from within their family units and communities, I examine previous research on structural farm change, motivations for farmers to continue farming, the importance of succession for farm resilience, and the processes of financial and career decision-making.

Structural Change in the Number and Size of Farms

Widespread change in farm size since the beginning of the twentieth century results in part from economic and political changes. In a 2019 article, Wenbiao Cai uses quantitative analysis to show that the change in farm size demographics between 1900 and 2002—namely that the number, size, and productivity of large farms increased, while the number of small farms and especially small family farms declined—is due not solely to competition with larger farms, but also to farm legislation and farm subsidy policies enacted over the twentieth century that specifically, but indirectly, favor large farms (388, 408). The shifts in agriculture, Cai argues, are unlikely to be results of unequal changes in skill levels among farmers or changes in the composition of crops—rather, these changes are the result of agricultural policies enacted over the twentieth century (2019, 408).

Sociological analyses, however, tend to challenge the idea that institutional farm change is driven solely by economic conditions, even those driven by policies which favor large farms. Linda Lobao and Katherine Meyer argue that the "the mass decline of the farm population" and "the structural transformation of agriculture, whereby most remaining farms...are incapable of fully employing and sustaining families" are not solely examples of policy change or economic transition, but also are a result of aggregate actions taken by individual households and communities (2001, 111). To understand the nature of farm change, then, researchers should investigate "sustained social practices of farmers," as well as farmers' interactions with outside considerations such as gender-based expectations, household dynamics, state and national programs, farmers' political organizations, and rural communities (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 111). The agricultural transition affects and is affected by the economic status of different types of farms; however, family farms are such socially embedded institutions that studying the transition as a purely economic phenomenon leads to incomplete analyses (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 111). The decisions of individual farmers in their communities create the transition on smaller scales, which contributes to the overarching trend of farm population decline and the structural transformation of agriculture.

Furthermore, studies highlight an ongoing tension in agriculture between tradition and modernization. Modern technological advancements such as larger, more powerful equipment, genetically modified seeds, and chemical pesticides and fertilizer are essential to allowing the family farmer to maintain the high crop yield necessary to stay in business; this is both the process and the result of an ongoing cycle of advancement and expanded production that Lobao and Meyer describe (2001, 110). However, the high purchase and maintenance prices of these technological developments increase input costs to the extent that family farmers are unable to

keep up, as well as unable to afford to purchase the extra land that is also necessary to make a living off of a family farm (Wuthnow 2015, 160). Therefore, smaller farmers struggle economically and eventually, in many cases, go out of business; this “displacement of farmers from farming” is the result of a system which prioritizes technological advancement and economics of scale (Lobao and Meyer 2001, 110). A similar tension between smaller and larger farms is evident in Cai’s article on farm size and economic policy: the increasing economic viability of large farms creates a need, real or perceived, to expand the size of the farm in order to remain competitive (2019, 408). Expanding land and increasing dependency on technological advancements has also lengthened farmers’ work hours, increased their physical distance from their families, necessitated hired help, and reduced the farmers’ sense of independence (Wuthnow 2015, 160-1). Family sociology, economics, and policy researcher Charles B. Hennon and sociologist Bruno Hildenbrand discuss the ongoing struggle to resist trends of industrialization and consolidation in agriculture to maintain the “traditional” values and patterns of life that a farming family considers meaningful; in most cases, farmers must sacrifice some aspect of independence in order to maintain other aspects of their traditional identity (2005, 514-5).

Evidently, farm size, economic policy, modernization, and social change within rural families and communities all contribute to the broad structural changes to agriculture observed in the United States. As individual actors, farmers make choices about their farm’s future that are informed by their knowledge of broader social and economic transition. This project investigates the extent to which farmers utilize their awareness, knowledge, and perception of these structural changes and the factors which contribute to them in order to strategize navigation of the

succession process during a time when family farms are experiencing insecurity and instability within the broader agricultural landscape.

Family Ties as Motivations for Farming

The family unit—the central social location where family farming occurs—occupies an important role in and exerts key influence over individuals' actions and decisions. The family farm as both a home and a business integrates paid capital-generating labor with the social unit of the family; thus, sociological analysis of the family farm must include analysis of the workings of the family itself (Bokemeier 1997, 10.) Research into these workings reveal that the family can serve as a mechanism that supports and enables family farming, or as an obstacle to the operation and continuance of family farms. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow discusses the deep connection that farmers perceive between intergenerational family ties and the profession of farming; his interview respondents consistently reveal that they feel a deep connection to their profession because of something "in [their] blood"—describing their reason for farming as an affinity they inherited (12).

Heritage, tradition, and the legacy of the parents and grandparents were all seen as key reasons to continue to farm and to support children in learning to farm (Wuthnow 2015, 14). Young family farmers learn from their parents and grandparents how to farm; furthermore, families provide financial assistance to the new generation, allowing them to avoid the prohibitively massive land and equipment costs associated with starting a farm (Wuthnow 2015, 25-6). At the same time, however, familial expectations can act as obstacles to a person becoming a farmer. It is common for daughters to be overlooked as potential heirs, regardless of whether they show aptitude for or interest in farming; furthermore, familial disagreements or tense interpersonal relationships can complicate succession (Wuthnow 2015, 17; 25-28).

Recognition of the perceived benefits of family farming for children motivates parents to continue to farm, counteracting elements of the experience that dissuade farmers from continuing. Joanna Dreby and Mairead Carr, in their 2019 study, find that despite experiencing economic difficulty, which discourages families from continuing to farm, parents “rationalize farming as a lifestyle choice undertaken for the benefit of their children” (904). The commonly-held idea among the farmers that these authors interviewed is that the agrarian lifestyle on a family farm is beneficial to children’s development, helping them to develop into well-rounded, hard-working people, whether or not the children choose to farm in the future (Dreby and Carr 2019, 912–4). In *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Viviana Zelizer describes how, in the twentieth-century push to outlaw child labor, agricultural labor—specifically labor on family farms, not corporate industrialized farms—was considered “good labor” that provided the child the chance to develop useful skills in a wholesome environment (1985, 77-79). For this reason, child labor on family farms was exempted from the category of harmful, exploitative child labor in public discourse (Zelizer 1985, 79). The idea that family farming is good for children and that children have a natural place on family farms is central to the analysis of the farming family, because the perceived synergy between childhood and family farms provides motivation for the farmers to continue their selected career. Yet this idea conflicts with studies contending that rural depopulation leads to limited funding, poorer public facilities, relatively low salaries, and few special programs for schools and other public services in rural areas; these conditions may convince families that their children would benefit instead from seeking education and employment away from rural areas rather than growing up on a family farm (Husa 2023, 307-8). However, studies of rural depopulation do not indicate whether pursuing education in urban

areas prevents children of family farmers from returning to operate and inherit the family farm later in life.

Familial influence, connection to familial heritage, the desire to continue the family's legacy, and the perceived benefits of family farming for farmers' children all motivate farmers to continue to farm; these motivations inform and affect farmers' development of approaches to farm succession. This project explores how these motivations to farm translate into strategies used by farmers to plan and prepare to pass the farm on to the next generation, and seeks to understand how familial connections support or create obstacles within the succession process.

The Importance of Succession Planning for Family Farm Resilience

Succession is a key part of the stability of family farms in the United States. Sean Lally and Matthew M. Mars discuss how the persistence of multigenerational family farms remains "threatened by uncertain succession outcomes" (2024, 560-1). In a 2012 study of family farms in rural spaces located relatively close to urban areas, sociologists Inwood and Sharp determined that farming families who could not identify an heir either "disinvest[ed]" or "enter[ed] a static management mode" where the family "placed less emphasis" on increasing farm productivity and began to sell off land and assets—effectively disinvesting in the future of the farm (115). By contrast, families who could clearly identify an heir began "a variety of horizontal and vertical growth strategies," from acquiring more land and growing higher-value crops to increasing productivity and investing in equipment (Inwood and Sharp 2012, 115). Notably, these changes occurred before the official transfer of farm ownership took place; the heir, though identified, had not yet taken on full responsibility. Succession planning is thus not only important for identifying a person to inherit the farm, but also key for maintaining the idea of the farm as a viable business that could not only continue to exist, but could grow.

In addition to identifying the importance of succession planning to farm stability and continuance, scholars also identify the important role of organization and leadership in family farm operations. In their case study of six family farms, Lally and Mars discover that a balanced leadership dynamic within the family was very important in influencing the organizational innovation and the resiliency of intergenerational family farms (2024, 560). They reveal the importance of ingenuity, shared problem solving, the honoring of legacy, and careful innovation in boosting the longer-term resiliency of the family farms (Lally and Mars 2024, 560). Since part of resiliency is defined as successful intergenerational succession planning, it seems both that proactive succession planning supports farm operation, and that the succession process is itself supported by a well-functioning farm.

Identifying an heir fortifies a farm family and provides encouragement to increase the resilience and plan for the future viability of the farm; failing to identify an heir has the opposite effect. Balancing responsibility and decision-making between generations, a key part of the transfer of farm ownership, also boosts farm resilience. By investigating individual experiences with inheriting farms and planning for farm succession, this project is able to show that, while identifying an heir and maintaining a balanced leadership style can increase the likelihood that the family will successfully pass on a farm that will remain in operation, neither identifying an heir nor adjusting one's leadership style completely dispels farmers' deep-seated worry about the future of farming. This worry continues to complicate farm succession. This study will further enable researchers to understand family farm resilience, stability, and continuance.

Financial Decision-Making and Career Choices

A family farm is a business; it is undeniable that farming must be economically feasible and must allow the farmer to earn a living in order for that farm to continue. However, research

shows that decisions regarding finances are made not solely based on financial considerations but are informed and influenced by personal and social considerations. Although money is a fully transferable medium which potentially allows for purely rational trading in the economic market, individuals consistently display a tendency to "embed money in particular times, places, and social relations" (Zelizer 1994, 18). People "earmark" money with the context and character of social interactions, assigning specific associations or meanings to the blank canvas of financial transactions (Zelizer 1994, 19). It is clear, Zelizer argues, that there is an "independent effect" of social and cultural factors in defining economic situations and making economic decisions; this effect is distinct from the influence of economic rationality (1985, 11).

In addition to the tendency to define or categorize money and monetary transitions based on the social context of those transactions, individuals make economic decisions about how to source, spend, and save their money based on the social influences that are, functionally, most important to them. In his case for including "market processes" such as individual economic decision-making as subjects of sociological inquiry, Mark Granovetter argues that individuals' choices when navigating economic decisions are "embedded in networks of interpersonal relations" (Granovetter 1985, 504). These decisions are neither the unguided actions of a singular uninfluenced agentic individual nor purely the result of societal pressure on that individual (Granovetter 1985, 504). This analysis, Granovetter asserts, "avoids the extremes of under- and oversocialized views of human action" and depicts the individual as an agent whose actions are influenced by immediate or relevant social and interpersonal communications (1985, 504). Making choices about money, scholars agree, is a process which draws influence from the social context that is most immediate to that person—their personal social networks as well as

the associations they assign, implicitly or explicitly, to certain groupings of monies or to certain financial transactions.

Furthermore, sociological research into career choice indicates that individuals choose their career paths in a similar way. In a study of students' career choices and trajectories, sociologists Phil Hodkinson and Andrew Sparkes observed that the students' career decisions "were pragmatic, rather than systematic"—individual young people made career choices "based on partial information located in the familiar and the known" (1997, 33). Students' career decision-making was "context-related" and "could not be separated from the family background, culture and life histories of the pupil (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 33). The choices were also "opportunistic" in that students made choices in reaction to "opportunities as they were perceived and encountered"—decisions were, therefore, only "partially rational" since these decisions were "also influenced by feelings and emotions" (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 33). Hodkinson and Sparkes expand upon these findings to propose a model of career decision-making which involves three "completely integrated dimensions"—pragmatic and rational decision-making, interactions with others within a set of shared social "regularities" or norms, and serendipity, or the "partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course" (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, 29, 36). Evidently, then, when individuals make individual economic decisions such as saving and spending as well as long-term personal and economic decisions such as career choice, they act as individuals with agency while simultaneously reacting to and accepting influence, direct or indirect, from important social bonds and relationships and the opportunities provided by their social context.

In the case of family farm succession, individuals—current farmers as well as potential heirs—make significant decisions about their own career plans and about the economic future of

the farm based on memories, emotional attachments, and meanings assigned to assets with financial value such as land and equipment. At the same time, individuals accept influence from the social networks—the family and the rural community, among others—within which they are embedded. The succession process of a family farm blends the considerations of the individual and the interactions of the family with the financial considerations of the farming enterprise and the career considerations of the individual heir; this project seeks to determine how farming families' social and interpersonal considerations influence their approaches to making decisions with significant economic and career implications during the succession process.

Conclusion

This project analyzes how family farmers navigate the process of passing down the farms they live and work on to the next generation. Currently, researchers understand that the decline in the number of farms and the growth in the size of the average farm reflects tensions in the agricultural landscape, which can introduce complications to family farm operation and succession. Researchers further understand that familial influences inform a person's choice to farm and affect a person's ability to farm. Studies of farm succession assert that optimism about the succession process is key to family farm resilience and viability, indicating that the succession process is vital to the farm at all stages, even when the current farmer has not yet begun the process of transferring responsibility to the younger generation. Furthermore, sociological researchers present a model of economic decision-making both for short-term decisions including purchases to long-term decisions such as selecting a career. This model emphasizes both individual agency and influence from important social relationships and relevant social norms. My own research provides an analysis of how family farmers engage with the tensions in the agricultural landscape and with the influence of the family unit to form

strategies with which to make decisions during the succession process and respond to complications or obstacles. This in-depth analysis of how farmers work to enable transitions in farm ownership contributes to a better understanding of a key piece of family farm continuance in the United States.

METHODS

To investigate the factors that affect or influence the extended farm succession process, this project compares different farmers' succession plans and the attitudes and strategies with which the farmers approach succession planning. I investigate how the following factors influence farm succession: farmers' strategies for inheriting and planning to pass on a farm, familial encouragement and support or lack thereof, wariness about the economic viability of the farm and of farming in general, and farmers' own complicated emotional relationship to farming. Of chief interest to this project is the nature of these influences and the extent to which they influence the process.

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with family farmers in Georgia, each lasting between one hour and ninety minutes. All of the farmers included in this study primarily raise row crops, although many also raise livestock and poultry; the exact crops grown and the proportion of resources dedicated to animal agriculture on a farm often varies year to year. All interviewees inherited the farms they operate; because I intend to explore the ways in which each farmer's experience of inheriting the farm influences their planning for succession, I did not include interviews with farmers who operate first-generation, newly established farms. Furthermore, I included conventional, organic, and mixed-methods farmers operating family farms of various sizes; my sample includes seven fully conventional farmers, two organic farmers, and two mixed-methods farmers. I have not endeavored to gather equal numbers of each

type of farmer—conventional, organic, and mixed-methods—because the primary goal of this study is not to compare farming methods but to understand the process of family farming succession in the state of Georgia, an area that includes farms of all three types. If significant differences in the succession processes appear between farms which utilize different methods, then a study of farm succession based on cultivation methods will be highlighted as an area where further research is necessary.

I identified interview participants first by reaching out to the farmers whose contact information I already had through personal connections or could find posted publicly on social media or on each farm's webpage. Following these initial interviews, I identified further participants principally through snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I included a question asking the participant if they would be willing to share my name, contact information, and research topic with any acquaintances, friends, and/or family members who may also be interested in participating in an interview. I also prepared a snowball recruitment script to follow up with interview participants after the interview has concluded, and this script was approved by the IRB. Interviews took place either in person or over Zoom, and were recorded with written and/or verbal consent. Conducting remote interviews over Zoom, a video conferencing platform, allowed me to observe the body language and facial expressions of the participants in a way that mimicked a face-to-face conversation.

Through these semi-structured interviews, I aimed to understand how social factors including familial relationships, a person's characterization of their own identity, embeddedness in a farming community, and the person's and family's perception of the economic viability of farming as a career influence the lengthy and often complex succession process. I began each interview by gathering basic demographic information and asking broadly about the person's

farm, gathering information about how their farming operation is structured and how they talk about or characterize different aspects of their farm. I followed up with questions about their employment status (whether they are a full-time farmer or are employed in multiple jobs). I then asked a series of open-ended questions, followed by "probes," or follow-up prompts, in order to understand how the farmer inherited their farm—how they learned to farm, what drove their decision to commit to farming as a career, how the process of taking on responsibility and ownership unfolded in their lives, and what they particularly like and dislike about their career—before transitioning into asking questions regarding if, and how, they are preparing to pass the farm on to the next generation in their family. When it came up organically in the interview, we also discussed their family, their relationships with family members, and their view of their role in taking care of and interacting with the land that they farm. I attempted to gather information not only about their experience as a successor and their experience planning for, educating, and training the next generation, but also how their experience selecting farming as a career and inheriting their farm informed their succession planning approach. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed me to listen to the information that the farmer mentions or elaborates on without prompting; this allowed me insight into what the farmer considers important and helped me understand their perspective on the topic.

Since this is a study of the farm succession process, I began the analysis by separating these farmers into four categories based on their characterization of their succession prospects, in order to identify the different potential outcomes of succession planning. Ultimately, this study will identify any differences in the succession planning strategies or conditions that could lead to each of these outcomes. Identifying any relevant differences in succession outcomes allows me

to begin to build an understanding of how the succession process operates and how farmers strategize to overcome obstacles.

The farmers I interviewed reported varying degrees of optimism regarding the likelihood of successfully passing down their farm to the next generation within their family. Four out of the eleven farmers interviewed are optimistic, but their prospective heirs are very young, so these farmers remain in the early stages of succession planning. Another four out of eleven farmers are optimistic with a plan in progress; these farmers have identified potential heirs who are older teens or adults and have expressed and maintained interest and engagement in the farm. Two farmers are categorized as conditionally optimistic or pessimistic. These farmers do not actively have a plan in place or are pessimistic about their ability to successfully pass on their farm to the next generation because of specifically stated reasons. Finally, one farmer appears to have no clear succession plan. This farmer reports an optimistic outlook on the process, but unlike other optimistic farmers, reported no clear plan or intentional methods by which he guided or continues to guide his potential heir into farming as a career. This category is defined by the farmer's reactive, rather than proactive, approach to farm succession.

In order to determine relevant independent variables that appear to influence farm succession, I first identified thematic elements within the answers that farmers gave in response to interview questions. I used highlighting and commenting features to highlight and label text with the idea expressed in a certain sentence, paragraph, or small segment of the interview. I then grouped these ideas into themes, or broader main ideas that helped me understand what elements of personal identity are relevant to farm succession, the extent to which familial relationships directly affect succession and the extent to which this influence is mediated through access to resources and financial support, and how a characterization of and reaction to economic factors

such as input costs, availability and affordability of land, and crop prices influenced their decision to take on farming and continues to influence their approach to succession planning for the future of the farm.

This study involves a small sample size of eleven family farmers. Despite the small sample size, the forthcoming detailed analysis of the in-depth qualitative data collected is able to identify meaningful conclusions. In-depth and semi-structured qualitative interviews allow the researcher insight into the perspectives held by the population being researched and the ideas, opinions, and truths that the people being interviewed glean from their experiences. While interviewees may not have an objective understanding of their context, and while a small sample size may limit generalizability, the purpose of this project is to understand commonalities and divergences in individuals and farming families. An objective understanding of succession is not the goal of this qualitative social science research project; instead, I expect to develop an understanding of experiences as expressed by the group of individuals whom I interview. Furthermore, although interviewees offer a subjective understanding of their own circumstances, their responses will be analyzed and presented as objectively as possible, by a researcher who is not a family farmer and does not share all of the same ideas and potential biases of this sample; this will aid in allowing readers to perceive any biases or subjectivities that the interviewees themselves may not have consciously noticed.

A summary table of the eleven family farmers included in this study is included below:

Table 1. Summary of Interview Participant Information and Projected Succession Outcome

Age	**Gender**	**Farm Type**	**Number of Children**	**Projected Succession Outcome**
63	Male	Mixed-Methods	Three sons	Pessimistic

41	Female	Mixed-Methods	Three daughters	Optimistic, but in early stages
59	Male	Conventional	One son, one daughter	No clear plan, but successful
43	Male	Conventional	Two daughters, one son	Optimistic, but in early stages
51	Male	Conventional	One daughter	Optimistic, with a plan in progress
47	Male	Conventional	One son, one daughter	Optimistic, with a plan in progress
39	Male	Conventional	One son, one daughter	Optimistic, but in early stages
43	Male	Conventional	One son, three daughters	Optimistic, but in early stages
43	Male	Conventional	Three daughters	Pessimistic
65 and 66	Female and Male (Husband and Wife)	Organic	Two daughters	Optimistic, with a plan in progress
52	Female	Organic	One son	Optimistic, with a plan in progress

FINDINGS

Each of the eleven intergenerational family farmers I interviewed were at various stages of passing down their family farms to the next generation, with varying levels of optimism about the succession process. In this section, I describe and analyze how these family farmers inherited the farms that they live and work on and how they are approaching the process of preparing to pass the farm on to the next generation. There is not one easily identifiable factor which ensures or rules out a favorable outcome in the family farm succession process, nor is there a clear point

at which the farmers transition from expressing worry to consistently expressing confidence in the secure future of their farms. Instead, I illustrate that farm succession is a complicated process with many considerations for farmers and farming families, which is complicated by contradictory strategies that develop from the tension between farmers' own attachment to farming and their anxieties about the future of farming as a whole.

Inheriting a Family Farm: Family and Legacy

When asked what made them choose to farm as a career, respondents claimed that, for them, their entry into farming was inextricably connected to their families. "I guess it's born and bred into you," says farmer Tom Fisher, when asked how he started farming. "My daddy—that's all he's ever done. And other than [vocational school] and [a temporary job at a lighting company], that's all I've ever done." Similarly, farmer Chris Lawson states, "I've always worked on a farm. My, my parents, my daddy and my granddaddy, well, my whole family was big farmers."

Furthermore, respondents described wanting to be involved with their family farm as early as they can remember. Fisher states that, during his early childhood, "the last thing I'd tell my momma before I left to go to school is, 'you find out where Daddy and [hired hand] and them's gonna be this afternoon when I get home from school so I can go and help them.'" Similarly, farmer Sam Walker recounts that "at a very young age, probably seven or eight years old," he would tag along with his father and his uncle—"being more of an aggravation than help, you know, wanting to do this, wanting to do that." He sheepishly yet proudly recounts his early zeal for farming:

> You're going to think this is crazy, but if I was in the yard playing and I heard a vehicle coming up the road, I could tell before I ever even saw it, just by the way the vehicle sounded, that it was my dad or my uncle, just from the way that the truck sounded on the road. And if it was, I was bolting straight to the road, like getting in the road, so they

> gotta stop, going "let me in, I want to go," that kind of stuff. It's, it's crazy. A lot of people don't understand that. [...] And then finally, you know, they started giving me a little responsibility—maybe, you know, pulling weeds out in the fields or or something like that, helping.

Lawson echoes a similar sentiment, stating that he “went everywhere [his] daddy went,” even getting up willingly “in the middle of the night” if his father needed help on the farm. All eleven farmers in this sample recount a similar sentiment of self-motivation, although they recall beginning their involvement in farming at different ages, from early childhood to adolescence. Most of the farmers took on tangible responsibility, such as operating equipment, starting in their early teenage years.

Inheriting a Family Farm: Economic Support

Support from older farming family members also proved invaluable for helping farmers manage the start-up costs associated with beginning a career in farming. All of the farmers interviewed in this study report that start-up and input costs—specifically land, equipment, and seed—are prohibitively high. Established family farms allow access to both land, since new farmers can inherit long-term leases as well as family-owned land, and equipment. As Chris Lawson states, “it's a whole lot easier when your daddy and your granddaddy or somebody's got equipment left...if you start at the finish line like some of these boys do, it's a whole lot easier than when you’re starting at the start line with nothing.” Since equipment costs have risen so sharply in the recent past, children of more established farmers benefit by inheriting equipment which was purchased more cheaply by their parents, and which the parents are well-practiced in repairing. More experienced farmers are also better able to get loans in order to pay for new equipment or equipment upgrades, as mixed methods farmer Jeffrey Bennet explains. If a new farmer were to try to buy the land and equipment necessary to farm, “a bank wouldn't give you the money for it.”

Seeds, another major input cost, have risen sharply in price in recent years as well, as genetically-modified varieties have increased in popularity. Genetically modified crops, as Bennet explains, are necessary because their pest-resistant qualities reduce the need for herbicide and increase yield—but they are expensive, leading to family farmers struggling to achieve the highest possible yield every year in order to cover the higher cost of seed. Families help alleviate the economic burden of high input costs by going "on halves"—an arrangement which entails the new farmer taking half of the financial burden of the farm from his or her parents, performing half of the labor, and collecting half of the profit. Some farmers take on half of the responsibility right away; others take on a smaller share at first, and gradually increase their stake in the farm over time, as they learn how to manage the family farm. By reducing start-up costs and allowing new farmers to gradually increase their share of input costs, support from older family farmers is key to ensuring that family farmers' early careers are viable.

As family farmers gain responsibility and eventually take over their farms, they work closely with their family members throughout their entire lives. Tom Fisher, a fifty-nine-year-old multigenerational family farmer, farms with both his father and his adult son, and he jokes that although his father has "turned all the decision making and stuff over to me," giving Fisher the final say in most of the financial and practical decisions, his father is "always going to be the boss." Many family farmers echo this sentiment; the work of operating their farms is inextricable from interaction, cooperation, and contention with their families. This close connection also brings family members together; Michael Harrison reports that he and his brother, who co-owns his farm, "talk every day" to determine "which direction we want to go the next day," and that they are "closer" because of it. Despite occasional disagreement and contention, he reports that he feels he can "count on" more "personal" and "reliable" help from his brother than he could

from an unrelated business partner—for example, he and his brother are ready to help each other with childcare at a moment's notice. For these farmers, the practical aspects of farming are closely entangled with family life and relationships.

Inheriting a Family Farm: Personality and Character

In addition to describing the connection to and support of their families, farmers also describe themselves as possessing certain personality traits which they consider essential to inheriting and maintaining a family farm. "It has a lot to do with...mental toughness and...what you find important in your heart and in your mind," says Daniel Harris, reflecting on his specific aptitude for farming. He expresses his belief that it takes a significant degree of fortitude and perseverance to continue working even when exhausted, when working incredibly late hours with little notice, or when losses, such as the loss of a crop that he'd put several months of care into or the loss of a calf whom he feels he could have done more to save, feel like personal failures. He acknowledges that perhaps not every person finds those kinds of challenges bearable. Similarly, younger farmer Sam Walker states the importance of resilience in a farmer as he recounts how as a child he would weigh and shell peas—what he describes as work that was rough on one's hands, and done in the summer heat—without complaining, while his siblings and cousins complained and found ways to avoid having to do this and other less pleasant chores. He describes himself as not one to "look for excuses," and acknowledges that it might sound "a little bit cocky," but that he was "tough" and willing not just to work hard at unpleasant chores, but to volunteer to help when he hadn't been told to do so because he wanted the opportunity to learn. Being a farmer also involves discipline in being willing to sacrifice leisure or social time when necessary. Michael Harrison describes that, since farming didn't have a set ending time for a shift of work, he wasn't able to go play softball with his friends as a child and

teenager. “I'd be on a team,” he said, and “out of 20 games, I'd make two of them or three of them, because I just couldn’t never...get away.” He says that at the time, it had made him frustrated, but that he understood that farming “is probably going to mean a lot more to you one day than playing a couple games of softball.”

As an example of the dedication and willingness to sacrifice that he believes good farmers possess, Jeffrey Bennet describes his total commitment to the farm during harvest season, which spans most of October and November. He relates that, early in his marriage, his wife would feel “resentful” because he was hardly involved at all in parenting during those months. Once, he tells me, he was unable to accompany his wife and children to his brother-in-law’s wedding, because going out of town for three days during harvest would mean losing a significant amount of the crop. He describes these situations with regret, wishing that he had been able to find help to fill in for him or to relieve some of the burden and acknowledging the strain that farming put on his relationships during busy seasons, but simultaneously he says that his brother-in-law “didn’t understand it” because “he’s not part of this [farming].” Although he recognized the difficult sacrifices that he and others made, he also maintained that these sacrifices were necessary and should, ultimately, be understandable.

Inheriting A Family Farm: Love for Farming and Sense of Purpose

Furthermore, the farmers I interviewed described a deep, sustained love for farming as one of their principal reasons for pursuing family farming as a career. As Michael Harrison states, “it's almost selfish, really, [how much] you love it. You love it that much, and you want to do it [...] you want it to succeed.” This love, Jeffrey Bennet states, develops from having farming “in your blood.” When pressed, he reveals that the phrase appears to both refer to the familial connection to farming—being “brought up around it” and being able to “see the lifestyle”—but

also to the personal connection that the farmer experiences—the fact that ““you love what you're doing.” All of the family farmers I interviewed expressed a similar feeling that farming was especially meaningful to them in a way that was central to their decision to be farmers, but that was difficult to describe in words. These farmers associate their particular feeling of being drawn to farming with being raised on a farm and experiencing that lifestyle from a very young age. While I don't assert that growing up on a farm causes an interest in farming, these family farmers' lifelong proximity to farming does seem to be an important factor in allowing them to notice and develop their interest in farming as a career.

It is this love for the land and this connection to the farming lifestyle that keeps farmers running their farms rather than pursuing other career paths. Many farmers recount growing up hunting, fishing, and playing pickup sports with siblings, cousins, and friends on and near their family's land. Being surrounded by family land allowed Sam Walker to be "always outside doing something," which he loved because he wasn't "cooped up" inside. Similarly, when he was a child, Jimmy Nelson wanted to spend his free time doing "anything outdoors"; farming was especially meaningful to him then and now, not only because he got to work outdoors, which he enjoyed, but also because the work involved "taking pride in what [he was] doing" and appreciating that his uncle "gave [him] the chance to do it." Having a visibly measurable impact on his family's farmland made him feel important. Comparably, Jeffrey Bennet states that, despite having to work in heat and rain when necessary, he'd "just rather be outside. I hate sitting behind a desk. You never see the sun." On his farm, he's able to work outdoors, methodically, finding his own rhythm; he relishes both the independence of "being [his] own boss" and the freedom of being able to make his own decisions about his family's land. Some report that they consider it important and particularly enjoyable to have lots of their own land, since this enables

them to avoid the cramped feeling associated with living in close proximity to others—as Cassie Sanders tells me, she “can walk for a mile and not see a person,” and she loves “peace and quiet,” “being able to see the stars,” and “not worrying about your dog running into the neighbor’s yard.” Living surrounded by farmland rather than in a neighborhood allows that space to feel more like her and her family’s home. Chris Lawson speaks of a similar connection to his family’s land—he describes plots of land on or near his family farm where different generations of his family have farmed for over a hundred years. The road he lives on, he tells me, is named after his great-great-uncle. “I'm the only person in my family that's still farming,” he states frankly, “so it just kinda makes me proud to know that I've carried on, I guess, our family legacy and name, I guess you would say.”

Farmers also connect to the land directly on an emotional level. For example, during a discussion of what he likes about farming, Tom Fisher struggles for words, then pauses for a long moment before looking out at his field and stating:

> There's certain things you smell during the year that...like in the springtime, you smell fresh plowed dirt. There's something that, you know—and then there's certain chemicals that, you arrive by a field and it—one thing, really, is cotton. When they defoliate cotton, when they take the leaves off of cotton before they pick it, that's got this real distinct smell. You can be riding down the road in the dark, and you smell that smell and, well, somebody sprayed that cotton field, you know, with cotton and fresh plowed up peanuts, you know, fresh cut corn. And you know, by smelling that smell, you know what time of the year it is.

Near the end of the interview, he pulls out his phone to display a photo of the sunset over one of his cotton fields, taken from the cab of his tractor. “This is why I spend my life farming,” he explains. “Because you get to look at stuff like that.”

For many farmers, this love extends into a feeling that they have found their purpose in farming—that they have been called by God to be stewards of the land. “I love my land better than anybody,” Chris Lawson states during a discussion about voluntarily adopting low-till

practices despite a lack of government incentives. “I'm the best steward of my land ever. People don’t understand that [...] I'm gonna do everything to my land because I love my land. That's why I farm. I'm not gonna do nothing to hurt me or my land.” Four other farmers—a total of five out of eleven—offer an almost identical statement. These farmers, as well as three additional farmers, also report feeling either “called” to a farming career or “allowed” to farm as a career by God. Michael Harrison tells me, “I feel like God's called me to do it. And that's one of the biggest things, is he's nurtured me my whole life to be good at it [...] God’s been good to me.” Similarly, Harris reflects, “I believe it's the good Lord that allowed [me] to do it, and to be profitable.” Lisa Gibson tells me definitively that “The Lord called us to the farm and has definitely blessed it” and states that farming has shown her “what taking care of and being good stewards of God's creation is like.” Farmers state these strong senses of purpose solemnly but readily, indicating that farming is more than a job to them—the work that they do resonates deeply with their sense of what their purpose is in the world. They believe that family farming is not just a career choice that they’ve made but something that reflects their God-given identity and individual purpose.

Inheriting a Family Farm: Frustration and Anxiety

A sense of ambivalence about farming emerges when farmers consider that farming, despite often being perceived as a meaningful, almost sacred calling, is difficult, thankless work with little promise of economic gain. “Getting out would be a lot easier,” Michael Harrison says when asked why one might stop farming. “I mean, it’s a lot easier [...] with the volatile prices, I mean, it’s just hard to pencil out a living [...] and it really is frustrating.” Similarly, Harris says he “[doesn’t] fault anyone for getting out of it” since “you work hard, and you don't have anything to show for it [for several years], and it gets really disheartening.” Harrison disparages the

insufficient amount of government subsidies offered to farmers whose crops fail due to unexpected natural disaster, calling the funding “basically enough money to hang yourself, not enough money to pay all your bills back and, you know, make a living.” Cassie Sanders discusses the “soul-crushing” effect of “losing everything” in a crop failure, which “happens again and again and again.” As she describes the experience of taking on responsibility of the family farm with her husband, she speaks of the future with dedication, but also anxiety, stating:

> And if we lost the farm, you'd forever be saying, why didn't we try? [...] A little girl told me yesterday, well, you know, sometimes if you're in a nightmare, just open your eyes and pick another dream. And I'm like, wow, if it's only that easy, I don't know if I—what other dream would I pick?

Similarly, Daniel Harris attests that in his experience, the people who stop farming and sell their land and equipment “didn’t want to sell out. They had to.” Generally, farmers seem to agree that family farmers farm because they feel an aptitude for the work, and they feel that the work is satisfying, important, and meaningful; they acknowledge that the primary barriers are economic obstacles, rather than any kind of change in the person’s career goals or affinity for farming.

It is also worth noting, however, that farmers often immediately follow negative statements with positive statements. Harrison, for example, follows his statement about farming’s disheartening failures by adding, “then when you have a really good year, everything, you look back and you say, man, it was all worth it. You know, that's when it's really good.” Similarly, family farmer Lisa Gibson describes the “mental and emotional load” of the constant problem-solving that farming entails, but follows this up immediately by stating that “It's good because...[my kids] get to see how we handle problems” and learn problem-solving skills and resilience in the process. Most farmers echo similar sentiments—for each negative aspect of farming that is described, there is a lesson that family farming teaches, an aspect of personal

resilience that it fosters, a familial relationship that it strengthens, or an element of meaning, personal satisfaction, or happiness that can't be replicated elsewhere.

Inheriting a Family Farm: Conclusion

Overall, for the farmers included in this study, many aspects of farming—the entry into farming, the reasons to farm, the connections which made their early career financially viable, the means by which they learned to farm, the reasons why they love to farm and why they continue to farm—reflect the importance of the family-oriented nature of the family farm as well as the importance of each individual farmer's sense of identity and purpose within that family system. Farmers feel connected to the land and to the farming lifestyle because of the lifestyle itself, the rewarding and meaningful feeling of making an impact and seeing results, and because of an emotional connection not only to the land as a physical manifestation of their family's legacy, but also to the land itself. Farmers express mixed feelings when they discuss how difficult farming is, with the inevitable cyclical nature of "good years" and "bad years", but despite this ambivalence, farmers express that they view themselves as meant to be family farmers, and they love it. Essentially, I find that farmers are certain that their profession—their role as family farmers—has been valuable and meaningful for them, but that they experience profound worry when they speculate about the probability that this career and lifestyle will remain viable and meaningful in the future.

Family Farm Succession

Farmers begin the succession process with many considerations in mind: the joy of farming, the sense of familial connection and legacy, the self-identification with the profession, the sense of being called as a steward, the ambivalence, the frustration, and the worry. Passing on a family farm starts with identifying one or more potential heirs. Most farmers first look to

identify one of their children as a potential heir; all of the farmers I interviewed had at least one child. At this early stage in the succession process, when the farmers are identifying children who they think might inherit the farm, two major factors are immediately, though not always explicitly, considered: gender and kinship.

Family Farm Succession: Gender

Of the eleven farmers included in the study, only two farmers expressed no hesitation in considering their daughters as female heirs. Lisa Gibson has three daughters, and spoke of them taking on the farm just as easily as other farmers mused about their sons inheriting their operations. Without including any qualifier about her children being female, she describes their general involvement in farm chores before discussing that she thinks her middle daughter has a special aptitude for farming. “My middle kid, I think she'll probably be the one to take it and run with it,” she states. Similarly, farmers Deborah and Anthony Smith, who have two daughters, noticed that one daughter expressed much more of an affinity and aptitude for farming than the other; they selected her as the heir, and that daughter and her husband are now partial owners of the farm. Notably, both of these farmers were among those who had multiple daughters, but no sons. It is also worth noting that both farmers who placed full confidence in their daughters as heirs were themselves women who had inherited intergenerational family farms.

Three farmers were undecided regarding whether they considered their daughters potential heirs. Jimmy Nelson states that he considered teaching his daughter to farm, and involved her in some chores, but reports that she never showed a specific enjoyment of farming, while his son did. He states that she had other interests, such as travel sports, which took up most of her time. Similarly, Michael Harrison reports that, of his three children, “all of them rode tractors with me,” but that his son, who he identifies as the probable heir of the farm, “probably

did it more than anything because he wanted to be with his daddy or, you know, he didn't want to be here with three girls." Finally, when asked if any of his three children are interested in farming, Sam Walker replies that his children are "all girls." He then reconsiders, however, and states that his second daughter, who is twelve years old, "may be interested. We'll see. She does show some interest." He states that because his daughter is "very nurturing" he "think[s] she would be a good farmer, you know, as long as she could learn how to like the mechanical side of it." He states confidently that she would be very good at growing plants and caring for animals. Ascribing other affinities or interests to daughters, or selectively recognizing a greater affinity for farming in sons, appears to be a comfortable middle ground for farmers with children of both genders when they begin to narrow the selection to one potential heir. Although these farmers do not rule out daughters directly, they more readily accept their sons as potential heirs and express reservations when they do consider their daughters.

Six out of the eleven farmers in this study make no mention of daughters as potential heirs. Two of these farmers had only sons, so they never faced this question, but the remaining four explicitly state that they ruled out their daughters based on their gender. When asked if his daughter is involved with the farm, farmer Chris Lawson states,"well, she's a girl, so...she don't have to." He offers no other explanation. Tom Fisher and Jason Scott similarly rule out their daughters as potential heirs on the basis of gender, but they follow this statement by describing that their daughters had other interests that they preferred to farming, while their sons took an interest in farming early on. Finally, Daniel Harris did not consider his daughter and only child a potential heir, which, he explains, is why he decided to expand the pool of potential heirs to include his much younger male cousin. He is currently in the process of training his cousin to

one day inherit his farm. Scott has similarly expanded his search and is also considering his nephew as a potential heir, in addition to his very young son.

Selecting a potential heir is generally the first step in the succession process, and it sets the tone for the early stages of the process. Right away, the farmer must decide how to engage with gender norms in farming; farmers can choose to exclude their daughters immediately, or they can less directly select away from seeing their daughters as potential heirs by instead focusing on the daughter's other interests, or—in rarer cases—they can place full confidence in the daughter as an heir. In cases when daughters, either because of the daughter's lack of aptitude and ability or because of the farmer's decision to prioritize male relatives, do not appear to be the farmer's best chance at passing down the farm, the farmer must make a decision regarding how far to extend the pool of potential heirs to other male relatives (such as nephews and cousins) in order to select someone to inherit the family farm.

Family Farm Succession: Aptitude Assessment

While identifying and considering potential heirs, the farmers begin to determine and assess the aptitude that these children show toward being a family farmer. This includes first noticing the interest in farming that the child shows. Farmers with prospective heirs in the early stages describe their potential heirs' interest in glowing terms—"my son is eat up with it," Michael Harrison says of his eleven-year-old son. "He wants to do it. He wants to drive something every day when he gets out here. I don't think any of the other ones will. But my son loves it." Similarly, Jimmy Nelson and Jason Scott each state that their sons, both seven years old, "love" farming; they each see a future in farming for their sons. Farmers with prospective heirs who are in their late teenage years or early adulthood tend to provide more nuanced and cautious assessments of their child's interest, regardless of how far the succession process has

progressed. For example, Daniel Harris describes how he is training his younger cousin, a man in his early twenties who Harris hopes will eventually take over responsibility for his farm. The two are “farming together now” and each take responsibility for “about the same amount of acres” as the cousin begins to buy his own equipment, but despite the high level of responsibility, Harris expresses reservations about his cousin’s potential. “I know he enjoys it,” he acknowledges. “Right now, I'm gauging his maturity.” Chris Lawson echoes the hesitation over his potential heir’s maturity, and also offers a more personal reason for hesitation. His eighteen-year-old son works on the farm, steadily gaining responsibility and training with the goal of taking full responsibility of the farm one day, but Lawson thinks that his son “needs to develop relationships with other farmers” and with “the bank” so that he can ask for advice, borrow equipment, and access loans when necessary in order to be successful as a farmer. He further worries that his son “loves it, but don’t have the love for it that I do.” Farmers with very young potential heirs, early in the succession process, appear able to project more confidence because they have not yet had to engage with the practical issues of succession or with their potential heir’s perceived shortcomings.

While assessing a potential heir’s ability to inherit and manage the family farm, there are certain attributes which farmers interpret as signaling an aptitude for farming. As discussed earlier in this section, farmers identify certain character traits in themselves which they believe are especially important for success in family farming; these traits include mental toughness, resilience, perseverance, dedication bordering on stubbornness, and a willingness to work hard and sacrifice. Farmers name these same traits when describing what character traits they think indicate that their selected potential heirs will be good farmers, and therefore a good choice to inherit the family farm. However, farmers express frustration at the perceived loss of work ethic

in their children and the younger generation, as compared to the parents' generation of farmers and farm families. Sometimes these frustrations are expressed lightheartedly; like other farmers with young children, Jimmy Nelson jokes that his son "would be following [him] around" on the farm "if he had got up this morning" instead of sleeping in. Other times, farmers express these frustrations as criticisms of their children or potential heirs; when describing his oldest son, who he'd originally hoped would take on the farm, Jeffrey Bennet states disappointedly that his son "just didn't, didn't see the value in buckling down and working. He just wanted to—he just wanted a paycheck." He expressed significant frustration that his children not only did not value the hard work that farming entailed, but also did not understand how rewarding he found it to be a family farmer. Similarly, Daniel Harris and Sam Walker specifically state their frustration in the younger generation's disappointing lack of "work ethic." Often, this frustration over a lack of appreciation for hard work is connected to farmers' frustration with the dwindling attention span that they perceive in their children, which they frequently blame on the child's increased screen time. Nelson states that when he was his son's age, he "would just soon sit on a tractor all day" but his son "gets bored with it and wants to, you know, after a few, few hours, so he's ready to go do something different…I don't know. Kids got so many distractions nowadays, so it's so much screen time versus what we had growing up."

Interestingly, however, farmers express frustrations not only with what they perceive as negative influences and undesirable character traits, but also with positive influences such as sports and extracurriculars. As Daniel Harris states, "the biggest thing is nowadays we're competing against...you got football practice all summer long. You got [football practice] all season. So these kids that would be willing to work are playing sports more than likely." The loss

of work ethic that farmers describe is, evidently, compounded by the fact that children who do maintain a work ethic are engaged in other activities which are demanding of energy and time.

Farmers' frustrations with their potential heirs represent practical concerns about obstacles to the succession process; work ethic, focus, and time commitment are important when learning how to manage the responsibility of a family farm. However, taken as a whole, these frustrations also reflect farmers' anxiety about the lack of security inherent to the succession process. As discussed in the previous section, farmers carry an awareness of the challenges and the precarious nature of family farming, and they worry about the future of family farming as a whole. By expressing frustrations about their potential heirs' perceived shortcomings, farmers may attempt to assign their worries to elements of the process that they can control. However, even increasing their childrens' responsibilities, monitoring their aptitude for farming, and managing their time commitments cannot ultimately assuage farmers' nervousness about the insecurity of family farming as a profession. Farmers set a lofty and unreachable goal for their children: that they demonstrate enough aptitude, work ethic, and commitment to farming to create a sense of security that is ultimately lacking.

Family Farm Succession: Mentoring and Training

Even as they express these concerns and frustrations, farmers educate, encourage, and support their prospective heirs, albeit cautiously. Farmers begin their childrens' involvement on the farm early. Cassie Sanders describes that her son has been "strapped to us" for "his whole life"; she recounts that her son "was back in the truck with [her] doing deliveries at two weeks old." She homeschooled her son until he was in fourth grade, and she feels that by being immersed in farming for his whole life, he was able to learn more about farming and be "challenged more," as well as to benefit from being able to see farm life with "no filters." As

children grow older, farmers begin to increase their involvement on the farm, increasing the time that their children spend riding on the tractors with them and giving them simple chores that increase in complexity and responsibility in age. For example, Jason Scott's seven-year-old son accompanies him while he starts the irrigation system and helps to dig in the soil when it's time to "check for worms" or test the soil quality. Older children, such as Lisa Gibson's fourteen- and nine-year-old daughters, "feed the animals and [...] plant pumpkins," and "take on responsibility" on the farm—responsibility that "will grow with age." Her fourteen-year-old is also learning to drive a tractor. Similarly, Sam Walker reports that his twelve-year-old manages a small garden to practice growing crops. Farmers with older teenage and adult children or prospective heirs focus on delegating tasks to their children that not only teach responsibility, but also familiarize them with different areas of the farming operation and help them learn to manage the farm as a whole. For instance, Chris Lawson's eighteen-year-old son delivers shipments of grain to local customers and processing plants, and Lawson is working up to the point where he can trust his son to "get the planter" and plant entire fields of peanuts on his own. Daniel Harris has assigned his younger adult cousin, who is in his twenties, full responsibility of farming and managing nearly half of his farm's acreage. As their prospective heirs grow in age, their responsibility increases, and farmers aim to teach their heirs both the individual skills necessary for each task that farmers do and how to manage the farm as a whole.

Involving young potential heirs and increasing the responsibility and involvement of older potential heirs is complicated by the fact that farmers and farming families also feel a need to shelter and protect their children. Sometimes this conflicting interest is introduced by the farmers themselves; Michael Harrison describes how, as a parent, he is much more sensitive to safety concerns than his parents were with him:

> The things that I did back in the day, I don't know if I'd let my sixteen, fourteen, fifteen, year old do it anymore. I'd get on a tractor and go over [in the field] when I was 11 years old and start cutting hay with a rotary mower. And I said, I didn't have a phone, didn't have a radio, didn't have a way to call back or nothing like that. My mom and dad would let me go do it because—you know, I don't know if we were more responsible then or, you know, I don't understand. But I would never let [my son] go do that. I'd have to go over there with him and put my eyes on him for 4 or 5 rounds before I'd ever…then I'd make sure he had a phone with him before I left.

He states that his hesitation stems both from concern for his child's safety and concern that his child would lose focus, let the tractor drift off of the "one to two inch straight line," and trample valuable crops. Other farmers express a similar dual concern: operating equipment is dangerous, they assert, and takes a level of focus that they hesitate to trust their children to consistently maintain.

In other instances, the farmers do not express hesitation around their prospective heirs' safety, but other family members do. This hinders the farmers' ability to involve their children in the day-to-day operation of the farm. Tom Fisher, who farms with his adult son, expresses his frustration that, despite his grandson's interest in farming, his son's wife won't let his grandson "know he has legs;" he states that her overprotectiveness hinders the child's involvement on the farm despite the child's apparent interest.

In these instances, farmers describe a disparity between their memories of their own process of learning to farm when they were children and the considerations that inform their strategies for passing on their farm to their own children. As they guide their children through the succession process, farmers have to balance both the goals of a farmer and the responsibilities of a parent. These farmers want their children to take on responsibility, but they also identify significant parental considerations which cause them to hesitate to actually dole out that responsibility. This complicates and can slow down the learning process for their potential heirs, which can cause the children to take on responsibility more slowly than the farmers might

consider ideal. On the whole, however, farmers view these safety considerations as necessary, if sometimes frustrating. Contradictions between safety concerns and farm involvement exemplify the tension between the farmers' role as parents and the farmers' role as farmers—a tension that manifests in contradictory goals and strategies in the succession process.

Farmers continue to balance the dual roles of parent and farmer as they closely monitor their child's developing ability to farm while simultaneously remaining cautious about assuming that their child wants to farm as a career. To monitor both the child's ability and desire to farm, farmers engage their potential heirs in a series of requirements or "tests" which they use to make judgements about the child's potential future as a farmer. The most common of these are educational requirements. Only two out of eleven farmers said that they did not or will not require their potential heirs to attend formal higher education or obtain vocational degrees; the other nine farmers said that these degrees were invaluable not only because they could offer their children a backup career, but also because it allowed their prospective heirs to discover an aptitude, affinity, or enjoyment of a different career path than farming. Farmers think it is important that their children try other things, so that if their children do decide to farm as a career, the farmers will know that it was because their children loved farming, not simply because they were never exposed to anything else. Some farmers also expressed that they required their children to have another job first or live away from home before deciding to farm as a career. Cassie Sanders, for example, states that, although her eighteen-year-old son says that he wants to farm, and she wants him to farm, she required him to attend college and live in the dormitories first, because he "does need to have a little bit of, some experience away from home." Similarly, Sam Walker describes how his father denied him the opportunity to work on the family farm right away:

> The week that I was graduating college, I told Daddy, "All right, I'm ready to come back home, I want to farm." And he told me, he said, "You might come back home, and you might farm, but you're not going to farm here." And that was my dad's words to me. I was like, okay, well I didn't have any money, I didn't have any land or any equipment. So I had to find another job.

He states that although his father's response initially surprised him, this approach allowed him to experience another job which he enjoyed, working in the timber industry for seven years before he felt that something was "tugging [him] back" or "calling [him] back" to farming. When he approached his father again with a plan to rent land and farm jointly, his father agreed. Walker plans to mimic his father's approach, though to a less intense degree, if he ends up passing his farm on to one of his children; he considers it essential that by trying a different career and taking initiative toward his own goals, he proved both to himself and his father that farming as a career was right for him.

Importantly, these tests aim to determine not only testing the child's ability to be a farmer but also their passion. As discussed earlier in this analysis, farmers strongly feel that they were called to be farmers, and that farming as a career is their purpose. Testing their children is not solely intended to ensure that their children have a secure backup plan; farmers are also attempting to discern whether their potential heirs experience that same sense of calling, meaning, and purpose. These farmers aim to ensure that their children have the financial and occupational security awarded by having multiple options, so that if they choose farming, it will not just be out of necessity but out of confidence that farming as a career is the right choice for them.

Farmers work hard to ensure that, should their children choose to farm as a career, they will be able to. Jason Scott, echoing nearly all of the farmers in the sample, describes how he and his uncle work to ensure that the farm will be in good condition for the express purpose of

passing on a viable, stable farm to his son and nephew “once the boys are old enough.” They aim to pass on a farm that is as secure as possible. However, farmers repeatedly state that they only want their children to own and operate the family farm if that is what the child truly wants to do as a career. Despite farmers’ deep desire to pass on the farm and to see their family farm continue after their retirement, farmers insist that they do not want to pressure their children into taking on the farm if it isn’t something that the child clearly wants to do. If there is any uncertainty about the child’s desire to inherit the farm, they would prefer their children work elsewhere rather than inheriting the farm. Jimmy Nelson expresses these conflicting goals, stating:

> I don't wanna force him, by no means, and make him do something that he don't want to do, but I also want him to learn responsibility on top of that. So if we're gonna do it, let's, let's do it the right way and let's not do it just because that's what we wanna do right now. And then if you're gonna do it, we're gonna go with it and do it and then you're gonna stick with it, but…I don't wanna force him, but I, I mean, I, I, if he wants the opportunity, I want him to always know it's there, but also don't wanna just hand it to him [...] I want him to have to earn it like I did.

In this quote, Nelson also introduces his belief that children who inherit farms have to sincerely want to farm—both because, as Michael Harrison states, farmers will be miserable and potentially unsuccessful at managing a farm if they don’t love farming and aren’t sure that this is their purpose, and also because farmers seem to believe that the children have to prove themselves. Among other farmers, Chris Lawson echoes a similar sentiment, stating that he wants his son to prove his dedication to farming because “I had to do the same thing. I paid my dues.”

Importantly, therefore, the testing of the potential heir hints at a less obvious, almost unreachably high standard: that the child should match their parent’s aptitude, willingness, and dedication for farming. In every critique of the child’s aptitude, ability, and character, and every

concern about their aptitude or willingness, the farmer expresses either overtly or implicitly a comparison to themselves. “I want him to have to earn it like I did,” Jimmy Nelson states. “He don't have the love for it that I have,” Chris Lawson critiques. Nearly every farmer recounts the level of focus, dedication, and desire to farm that they remember having as a child and teenager, and worries that their own potential heirs do not quite match these traits. This high standard does not rule out the child inheriting the family farm; instead, these comparisons and standards reveal that in ideal circumstances, farmers would see evidence not only that their potential heir is a good farmer, but that their heir matches their own aptitude and love for farming perfectly. In this ideal situation, the farmer could feel more confident than they currently feel that managing the farm will work out for the children at least as well as it has worked out for themselves. The paradox in this comparison highlights the consistent internal conflict in the farmers’ approach to the succession process—that these farmers love farming, but worry that it is a challenging and precarious profession, and so hesitate to commit their children to it without the indication of security that farmers imagine their children’s heightened ability or dedication would provide.

Family Farm Succession: Worries About the Future

Most of the farmers in this study currently expect that they will be able to pass on their family farms to a younger family member, and are in the early-to-late stages of preparing for this eventuality. But, as mentioned in the previous section, two farmers either have failed or expect to fail to pass on their farms, and several other farmers express concern about the future of their farms’ succession prospects. When faced with worries about succession, or the prospect of failing to pass on their farms, farmers exhibit three main emotional reactions. The first is a sense of deep sadness, which Daniel Harris reveals when he describes his process of mentoring and sharing responsibility with his younger cousin in the hopes that his cousin will one day inherit

his farm. “There's coming a day when the farm legacy is coming to an end,” he says heavily. “I just don't want to be on me.” This sadness is coupled with a desire to keep farming for as long as possible. For example, Tom Fisher and Jeffrey Bennet describe that their elderly fathers—eighty-eight and eighty-five respectively—continue to farm every day despite their age and declining health because, as Bennet says, “everybody needs to have a purpose.” By continuing to work on the farm and have a say in decision-making, even if their share of day-to-day responsibility has greatly decreased, they are able to continue feeling the sense of purpose that they have always associated with farming.

The second emotion expressed at the prospect of failing to pass on the farm is acceptance. Jeffrey Bennet, the only farmer in this sample who has, at the time of the interview, failed to pass the farm on to any of his adult children, speaks about the succession prospects with acceptance, and talks proudly about his children and the careers that they chose to pursue instead. Similarly, Deborah Smith discusses that although she and her children would like her grandchildren to one day inherit the farm, she realizes that it is possible that they will not, and states calmly that “you don't want to obligate your children to your dreams or your desires. You can't live through them vicariously.” Overall, farmers are certain that even if their children do not farm as a career, they speak with pride about the positive character traits that their children have developed from growing up on a farm, and often name the ways that they believe these traits have made their non-farming children more effective in other careers or in their family lives.

A third emotional reaction is avoidance. Sam Walker, for example, doesn’t elaborate on what he plans to do with the farm in the event that he is unable to identify an heir; he simply states that he doesn’t know and indicates that he would like to move on to the next question. Similarly, Jeffrey Bennett dodges the question of what he will do with the land when he is

finished farming, stating that it still belongs to his elderly father, so he will make that decision, if he has to, when his father passes on; he comments that although he expects to outlive his father, “none of us know what’s going to happen.”

Notably, even farmers who appear to be progressing in their goal to pass on their farm to the next generation express wariness or worry about the future of their farms’ succession prospects. Cassie Sanders expresses this when she discusses her concerns about her eighteen-year-old son’s future if he inherits the family farm:

> My son thinks he wants to farm, and I'm not going to discourage him. But I think about the young people that want to get into this and do this. There's so much stacked against them now that I wonder, who is going to feed us? Who is going to do this? You can't afford to do it. What is it going to look like? What does the future of farming look like? And, you know, there's less and less of us doing this work. [...] He wants—he thinks he wants to do it. But he's eighteen. He's in school right now. And I hope he does. I hope he goes on and takes over. But what is it going to look like for him? I don't know.

Sanders describes a latent worry that many farmers hint at. They’re aware that passing down the farm is not solely a decision that they can make, or that their potential heirs can make. Their childrens’ chances of continuing the family farm are dependent not only on how effectively the family navigates the internal succession process, but also based on the broader conditions for farmers and the viability of family farming as a career. Farmers carry an awareness of that anxiety-inducing reality and understand that factors they cannot control coexist with, and may eventually undermine, the elements of the succession process that they can plan and strategize to navigate. As they progress towards passing on their farm, then, farmers must reconcile their profound attachment to farming with the knowledge that the future of farming is uncertain. Farming is something that farmers love, but it is something that they are wary about encouraging their family to rely on. Despite all of the meaning and purpose that farming has brought them,

these farmers cannot guarantee that farming will be a viable career for their children, and their awareness of this uncertainty is at the center of many complications to the succession process.

Family Farm Succession: Conclusion

Overall, it's clear that family farm succession is an extremely complicated problem with many considerations for farmers. Current family farmers enter the succession process with a deep love for farming and a certainty that farming is meaningful and purposeful for themselves and their families. Farmers feel incredibly connected to their family's farmland and the family farming lifestyle, and they are invested in the farm's continuance, since the farm is a physical manifestation of their family's legacy. However, farmers also enter the succession process with an awareness of the struggles, hardships, and sacrifices that farming requires and the uncertainties about the future of family farming as farms grow fewer, larger, and increasingly consolidated. Farmers express that they view themselves as meant to be family farmers, but this does not dispel the ambivalence or anxiety with which they view their life and chosen career. These conflicting feelings manifest as farmers plan for the succession process, and they must figure out how to balance the fact that, while they want their children to take over the farm, they also know how difficult and uncertain this career path is. Farmers must manage both the goal of succession and the high standard that they hold their children to; they experience disappointment when they feel that their children do not fully match their zeal for farming but must manage their expectations, frustrations, and anxieties in order to achieve the goal of passing on the farm. They must also, however, balance their desire to pass on the farm with their parental desire to see their children follow their own passions and live the most fulfilling lives possible, and with their desire to ensure security in their children's futures.

Family farming is a source of pride, identity, purpose, freedom, and joy; it is something that farmers' children are exposed to and immersed in early on, but it is also a difficult life that farmers do not want to pressure their children into choosing. Inheriting the family farm is a responsibility which farmers want to ensure that their children are suited and prepared for, as well as a special role that they feel their kids need to earn. Family farm succession, therefore, is a complicated process that is difficult to ever definitively conclude. Farmers' uncertainties about the future of family farming and their dual roles as parents and farmers foster contradictory strategies which develop a tenuous succession path that can be destabilized at any point in the process, from very early in the child's life to very late in the parent's career.

CONCLUSION

Family farmers are the backbone of American agriculture. Because family farmers make up a longstanding but declining majority of farmers in the United States, changes to this section of the agriculture industry can affect food security, stability of rural communities and economies, and the functioning of agriculture as a social institution in the United States.

As this study has revealed, family farmers' relationship to farming is complicated and often contradictory. Farmers develop a love for farming, a sense of purpose, and a close emotional relationship to the farm lifestyle; at the same time, they carry an awareness of the hardships and shortcomings of a farming career and an ambivalent opinion of its future. These conflicting ideas manifest as contradictory strategies in their succession process. The farmer's own internally conflicting goals, as well as considerations about gender norms, aptitude for farming, and maturity of potential heirs, destabilize farmers' confidence regarding the prospect of passing down the family farm. At any stage of the process, this destabilization can cause the succession process to go "right" or go "wrong"—to continue smoothly, to encounter major

interruptions or, in some cases, eventually to fail. Farmers' methods of engaging with elements of the inheritance and succession processes can complicate, enable, or impede the succession process.

Farmers' worries about the future of family farming inherently and extensively affect the process of passing on family farms. Uncertainty in the future viability and stability of family farming makes it difficult for family farmers to achieve successful intergenerational transfer of the farm while simultaneously feeling confident regarding their children's career security. In some cases, farmers successfully pass on the farm, but this does not assuage their concerns about the future; in other cases, farmers' children pursue careers outside the farm, and although farmers experience profound sadness at the loss of the family farm, they also experience pride in their childrens' choices and a sense of security in their future. Family farm succession, therefore, is a process which does not easily or simply resolve; as with farming itself, there is an element of sacrifice and continued instability regardless of the family farm's fate.

This study has analyzed the succession processes, strategies, and complicating factors for eleven intergenerational family farms in the state of Georgia. Further research could more explicitly determine the impacts of changing parenting norms on farm succession, identify any added anxieties caused by changing environmental conditions such as droughts, heat, and soil quality, or describe the effects of farm change on rural land use patterns. Additionally, further research exploring farm succession could expand to include other geographic areas where farming may occupy a different social and cultural position, or where family farm decline may be occurring on a greater or lesser scale. Hopefully, this study can contribute to a developing understanding of family farming and family farmers in the changing agricultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Name ____ Date ____________________

I. Context

1. Age
2. Education
3. Occupation — farmer, non-farmer, other farm income
    a. For how long? Briefly describe career path

II. Past

1. Tell me about your farm.
    a. Size, appearance, distinguishing characteristics, etc.
2. Did you grow up farming? Did your parents farm? What about your extended family?
3. Tell me about your engagement with the farm. Did you help out often? Did you have chores?
    a. What did you do for fun?
4. How did you feel about your farm when you were growing up?

III. Succession

1. When it was time to choose a career path, what factors were top of mind for you?
2. How long did you know you wanted to be a farmer / did you know that you didn't want to be a farmer?
3. Tell me what the process of taking responsibility for the farm was like.
    a. What was your greatest challenge / greatest joy?
4. How do you feel about your decision (to farm or to stop farming) now?

V. Land

1. Have you ever sold or rented land or considered selling/renting some or all of your land?
    a. Do you want to expand?
2. Why did you decide to sell or rent land?
3. Have you ever bought land? Why did you buy land? What was the process of buying land like?
4. Did you find that land ownership or access encouraged or discouraged you from pursuing a career as a farmer?
5. Tell me about the other farms near you.
    a. What do they farm?
    b. Do you know the owners of these farms?

VI.

1. What was your favorite place on your / your family's farm?
2. Tell me about the land characteristics. Are there environmental factors that make farming more or less feasible? (soil quality, soil type, water availability, etc)
3. Were there other, non-physical factors that made farming more or less feasible? (irrigation regulations, fertilizer or pesticide regulations, labor, help around the house, etc).
4. Were there environmental or other factors that contributed to your enjoyment of farming?
5. How much time did you spend outdoors? Do you wish you spent more or less time outside?
6. What do you like most about farming now / what do you miss most about farming?
    a. What would you change about your chosen career, given the chance?

VII. Succession Planning

1. Do you have kids? How many/how old?
2. Tell me about their engagement with the farm? Do they help out often? Do they have chores? How do you get them involved?
3. Do any of your kids want to farm as a career? What do you tell them / do you / how do you help them prepare?
    a. Do you plan to follow the same approach that your parents did?

VIII: Opinions

1. In your view, why do people decide to stop farming / why do people decide to keep farming?
    a. *What kind of person do you think does well at farming?*
2. Can you give me examples?

IX. Social Networks

1. Who do you talk to about these things?
    a. *Do you know other farmers in the area? Do you talk to them? What about?*
2. Do you think a lot of people feel the same way you do?

X. Conclusion

1. Thank you for your time.

Appendix B. Written Consent Form

University of Chicago Consent for Research Participation

Study Number: IRB24-1033
Study Title: "Cultivating a Legacy: Exploring Inheritance and Succession Planning Strategies on Intergenerational Family Farms in Rural Georgia"
Researcher(s): Caroline Juliet Cairney, Marco Garrido, Sabina Shaikh

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Purpose: This research aims to study the process of family farming succession in order to better understand the changing agricultural landscape.

Procedures and Time Required: You will be asked to participate in one sixty-minute interview either in person, on zoom, or over the phone. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded.

Financial Information: Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation in this study does not involve any risk to you beyond that of everyday life. Taking part in this research study may not benefit you personally, but we may learn new things that could help others.

Confidentiality:

Data, recordings, and identifiers (such as name and contact information) will be stored on a personal password-protected laptop until these files can be uploaded to a secure, password-protected folder on the secure file syncing and storage service Box. Identifying information such as names will not be included in the final, publishable research paper. Identifiable data will never be shared outside the research team.

If at any point you decide to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

De-identified information from this study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research without your additional informed consent

Contacts & Questions:

If you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact the researcher, Juliet Cairney, via:

- Phone: (478) 230-4748
- Email: jcairney@uchicago.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-irb@uchicago.edu.

Consent:
Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You will be provided a copy of this form. Consent will be demonstrated by completion of this form as well as by verbal acknowledgement of consent during the interview.

Yes	No	
_______	_______	The photographs and recordings taken as part of this research can be included in publications and presentations related to this research.
_______	_______	Identifiable information from this study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research without your additional informed consent.
_______	_______	The researchers may retain your contact information in order to contact you in the future to see whether you are interested in participating in other research studies.

Participant Name (Printed) ___________________________________

Participant Signature ____