

John T. Nickel

A genuine love of nature drove his business decisions and led him down the path to preservation.

Chapter 01 - 1.20

Introduction

Announcer: The John T. Nickel story is that of a work ethic which led to success far beyond anything he could have ever imagined. While in his early twenties, along with a friend, he traveled to California for an adventure. He returned to Oklahoma with an idea that set him on a path beyond his wildest dreams. As a result, John developed Greenleaf Nursery in Cherokee County, Oklahoma on Lake Tenkiller into a multi-state business, and then, at his brother Gill's request, he returned to California to participate in the development of vineyards and wineries such as Far Niente in the Napa Valley. As a young lad, John enjoyed hiking and fishing along the Illinois River and dreamt of owning that land one day, which led to the ownership of Caney Creek Ranch, the J-5 Ranch, and the donation of 14,000 acres to the Nature Conservancy for a Wild Life and Nature Preserve. To complete the dream, he reintroduced elk to the John T. Nickels Family Nature and Wild Life Preserve. He was recognized with a Wildlife Stewardship Award by the Nature Works in 2004 and was a recipient of the Nature Conservancy's first Oak Leaf Award in 2006. This story actually begins in a small "Mom and Pop" nursery business in Muskogee, Oklahoma where John T. Nickel was born. And now, you can hear John tell you the story here on the Oral History Website, VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 11:13

Mom and Pop Business

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is February 7th, 2018. John, would you state your full name, please?

John T. Nickel: Yea, John Todd Nickel. Todd is my mother's maiden name.

JE: And then your birthdate?

JN: My birthday is August 10th, 1935.

JE: Making your present age?

JN: Eighty-two years old.

JE: Where were you born?

JN: I was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

JN: We are at my home in midtown Tulsa.

JE: Which is an outstanding home that goes back to what year?

JN: The original plans, the architectural plans, were drawn in 1929. So, the house was probably built in somewhere between 1930, 31.

JE: And, who built it?

JN: This was built by a oil man, who was a wild cat oil man, so they say, and his name was Forester Periot. He had architects come in from Kansas City to design this home for him, because he had hit the mother-load. Also, the same architects that did the original landscape architecture here are the same ones that did Philbrook.

JE: And that means that Waite Phillips, who was building Philbrook at the time, they were doing about the same time then.

JN: Probably. Mr. Periot was the first president of Southern Hills Country Club, and he was also the second president of it. This house is in the book written about one hundred historic Tulsa homes, and it tells the story about it.

JE: Would this be a Georgian style home?

JN: Yes, yes, it is. Other people that have seen it, they say it's a really, really good example of Georgian.

JE: And that style came about because of King George at the time and people wanted to replicate his style of architecture.

JN: Yes, right, exactly, yes.

JE: How many bedrooms in the house? (laughter)

JN: Oh, my goodness. Let's see, one, two, three, four, five. In this house, five, and then in the guest house, two.

JE: When did you buy the house?

JN: We bought the house, I believe, in the year '04, possibly '05, but I think it was '04. Now, we moved here from a ranch in Cherokee County down southeast of Tahlequah. My wife and I lived there with our young daughter who was born here in Tulsa but moved down to the ranch. I told her, I said, "well, when it's time for her to go to school, we'll go to Tulsa which is where they have good schools for her, and we'll find a home with a yard." So, sure enough, she found one.

- JE:** (laughter) Can we say how many square feet?
- JN:** I don't exactly, John, but it's probably about, I'm gonna guess 17,000, counting the guest house.
- JE:** Right, didn't you tell me it had fallen into some disrepair when you found it?
- JN:** Yea, it was actually in the process of being rehabilitated by the owner that I bought it from. But his project kind of fell on a little hard time, and so, we picked it up and took the rehab from there on up to where it is now.
- JE:** Well, it's a very beautiful home, and it's huge, but somehow it feels cozy, and the rooms aren't gargantuan, like it's swallowing you up.
- JN:** You know, everybody says that about this place.
- JE:** Yea.
- JN:** You see it from the outside, you'd never guess how warm it is from the inside.
- JE:** And we're sitting in a beautiful dining area with beautiful chandeliers, a fireplace over here, it's gorgeous, very nice, and thank you for letting us come in here to record this.
- JN:** Absolutely.
- JE:** Um, your mother's name?
- JN:** Rebecca Anne Todd.
- JE:** Where did she grow up?
- JN:** She was born and raised in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Her mother came to Muskogee as a young lady from East Texas, and she'd always tell you "East Texas, not West Texas." Her father came from somewhere in the hills of Tennessee. They both settled in Muskogee which is where they met. Then they had three children. I guess mother was the oldest.
- JE:** What was her personality like?
- JN:** She was a real delightful lady. She was known as a "Real Lady." Her mother was a stickler for manners and all the good things that proper young girls go through and learn.
- JE:** Is there anything you think you draw from her?
- JN:** Yes, she was rather slow like me. (laughter) Not a highly excitable person, but she was also a doer and she held her own. Her mother was very domineering. My mother wasn't domineering, but in her way she did what she intended to do.
- JE:** Why do you say that, "slow like me?"
- JN:** I'm kidding you about that.
- JE:** Yea.
- JN:** I mean...
- JE:** Do you think your personality is kind of like hers?
- JN:** My personality is similar to hers.
- JE:** Yea.
- JN:** And as I'm getting older. (laughter) I can see more all the time.

JE: Your father's name?

JN: His name was Harold Reginald Nickel. He was born on a homestead in New Mexico. His dad and mother, I don't know how they got there, but anyways, they homesteaded 160 acres, and proved it up, and while they were out there, he was born. Then they moved back into Oklahoma, and he grew up in Clinton, Oklahoma.

JE: Any idea how you mother and father met?

JN: Yea, my mother and father met in a very interesting way. They were both in Oklahoma University at the time, and my dad was having to work his way through school, whereas Mom's parents apparently had enough wherewithal to put her through without working. So, he worked in the sorority house where my mother lived, and that was the Tri Delta House. And he cleaned up the dishes and did the bust work and so forth like that, and that's where they met. And they both graduated from Oklahoma University.

JE: And that was in what year?

JN: Well it had to be about twenty-nine.

JE: Yea. I always admire when I hear people graduated from college back then because so many, of course, didn't think about it.

JN: That's right.

JE: Education. Did they preach education to you, when you were growing...?

JN: Not in an overt manner, no. It kind of came to me that that seems to have served a lot of people well. Although I didn't follow in their footsteps. I had to get educated my way.

JE: Right, what did your father and mother do for a living.

JN: When I was eleven years old, maybe I was ten years old, 1945, they started a little mom and pop business in Muskogee, and it was called Greenleaf Nursery Company where we sold plants, shrubs, trees, did pruning, did spraying, did all the stuff that the landscaper does today. It was a tiny little business. As time went along and I grew up, and I kind of had a bumpy start in life, and so, when I was old enough to figure out what to do, I had grown up in this nursery business, and I saw an opportunity there, I said, "well, you know what? I'm gonna make this work. So, that's how that happened. That was back in, oh, 1953, 4. So, I became partners with mom and dad in the business and learned all about it.

JE: Did your parents go to school for, say, horticultural degrees, or anything like that?

JN: No, not at all. My dad had a business degree from OU, and not sure what Mom's was, but whatever young sorority lady comes out of there with is what she had.

JE: Was that a big gamble for them to say, "well, we're gonna start a nursery here." What would give them that idea?

JN: It was terrible gamble, and I'm gonna tell you some behind the scenes stuff about that. My dad was an alcoholic, so my young life was centered around his alcoholism and losing jobs and moving from one place to another. One time we moved to Sylacauga, Alabama.

He lost that job and we were back, and he went to work in Prior. In those years I traveled into a lot of different places and a lot of different schools, and went to a lot of different AA meetings, because we he joined AA, he was thirty-five years old. I saw this man turn his life around from not being able to be responsible to being one of the most overly responsible people that I ever knew. He went into this little landscape nursery business on borrowed money the bank in Muskogee, I believe it was Citizen's Bank, loaned him five hundred dollars. So, he bought a car with a trailer hitch on it and a trailer. From that time on we were in business. (laughter) He never did stop going to Citizen's National Bank when we were alive, and it was still there, (laughter) and that's the reason.

JE: Did that business exist; did they do that till their death?

JN: Yes.

JE: So, it did provide the income they wanted?

JN: Well, it did up to a point. Then, when I branched out and started the wholesale nursery over on Lake Tenkiller, south of Tahlequah, we eventually sold the retail business. While I was living up at the new nursery, the one that I had started when I was twenty-two years old, my father and mother stayed in Muskogee, did what they did down there up until the time it was sold to another person, dad and I were still partners, he would come back and forth to the nursey from Muskogee. Anyways, it was a slow, hard start, but here we are.

JE: So, I asked you what you drew from your mother. What about your father?

JN: My father, you know, he and I were different, and we didn't have the best relationship as a young guy. He was trying to get over alcoholism and I was recovering from being an adolescent, and we were butting heads all the time. (laughter) So, a lot of the things about my father I determined I did not want to be like. That might have been a good thing. The other thing about him, once he turned around and quit drinking, all of a sudden everything got serious with him and he had to make a living now and he had to try to make, amount to something. So, he put me to work at a young age. Well, you know, I said, "my buddies are all at the swimmin' hole and playing gold and do this and that and here I am, home working, making thirty-five cents an hour," (laughter) and I thought that was a poor deal at the time. Well, let me tell you what, that was the best deal I ever had, learning how to work when I was young, and it stuck with me.

JE: Yea, when it came to the age to drink, did you father's experience affect whether you wanted to drink or not?

JN: No, it didn't. I decided to learn that early on to. I didn't have his problem and he explained to me, he said, "some people can handle it, and some people can't, and I can't, and I know it," but I can, and I also know that.

JE: Right, right, but obviously sympathetic when you hear stories of alcoholics in families that are going through all that.

JN: Oh, yea, yes, absolutely. So, anyway, it made life as a young boy different. So, I grew up in a very different way. Not the normal, conventional way that most kids grow up.

JE: They also instilled in you a work ethic that you had to work at an early age.

JN: Exactly right, yes, there wasn't any tolerance on it. (laughter) We went to work.

Chapter 03 - 7: 58

December 7, 1941

John Erling: Did you have brothers or sisters?

John T. Nickel: Yea, I had one brother, he's four years younger than me. His name is Harold Gilliland Nickel. Gilliland was my father's mother's maiden name. They came into Oklahoma from Kansas I think, and his dad, I don't know what nationality he was. I think it may have been Dutch, it may have been German, I don't know for sure, but he could speak several different languages, and German was one of them, and Dutch was another one, so I figure that growing up in Kansas back in those days, there were a lot of those type immigrants that had come into that country.

JE: When you said, "his dad," who did you mean?

JN: My grandfather.

JE: Your grandfather, yea.

JN: That I called Daddy John.

JE: Oh, okay, did you enjoy him?

JN: He was a good man. My mother's father was an excellent man, and he probably had more influence on me than anybody from the time I was born till I was ten years old.

JE: Well, it takes a village doesn't it? And so, we have family members and I'm sure those around Muskogee as well.

JN: Yes, absolutely.

JE: The first house you lived in, do you have any memories of that?

JN: Oh, sure.

JE: Probably will get twenty-five of them in this house.

JN: (Laughter) Probably. Oh, you mean the first, when I was a child? Yea, that was in Muskogee. I vaguely remember, I remember when my little brother was born, and they brought him home. From there, a lot of times we wound up with at my mother's parent's home, and that's why we were so well acquainted with, and influenced by my mother's father, and her mother.

JE: Yea.

JN: Then, we went to Alabama. We lived there awhile. Then we came back and lived with the grandparents again. Then, when Dad got straightened out and he and mom started the business, we built a little four room house, which it's still standing, out at the nursery in Muskogee. That's where my brother and I grew up, and it was a tiny little thing. He and I shared a bedroom and shared a bathroom. Mom and Dad shared a bedroom and they shared a bathroom, and then we had a kitchen and a little place to sit down. So, that was it. And the next home, things had begun to turn by then. Dad was straightened out, he was doing well. So, we built a home over on the north side of the Muskogee Country Club. I guess I was a junior in high school when we finally moved into that place.

JE: First school that you attended?

JN: The first school I attended was in Muskogee and it was called Longfellow.

JE: And then you went onto Junior High School from there?

JN: No, from Longfellow we went to Washington. That's where I finished sixth grade, and in the meantime, I had moved to Alabama and gone to school there and back. So, by the time I was in the sixth grade, that was the end of my school at Washington Grade School. Then I went to a junior high called Alice Roberts and went there for three years. Then went to Muskogee Central High School for the rest of it.

JE: And then you graduated in what year?

JN: 1953.

JE: December 7th, 1941, you would have only been six years old, do you have any recollection?

JN: One of the memories I had that still stands out; we had a big floor radio that stood about three or four feet high just everybody did back in those days. We would hover around that radio and my mother and I were listening to the radio, in a program, and it broke in on it and said, "the United States has just declared war against Japan," and I said, "declare war, what does that mean?" My mom said, "well, these countries are not agreeing, and they have decided they're gonna fight each other and we're in the fight now." So, I grew up back when it was sugar rationing and gasoline rationing. You could buy bread and eggs and not much else.

JE: Right, many things were rationed, but did that effect your family at all?

JN: Of course, it affected everyone's family in those days, back in the forties.

JE: Did family members then go to war?

JN: The only family member that went to war was my mother's brother, Felix Todd. As I told you earlier, his mother was a very dominant democratic person. She was at the Democrat Convention, I forget where it was that year, but anyways she had her stroke, but meanwhile, she had gotten her son Felix appointed to West Point. So, he died in World War II.

JE: Um. In high school, Muskogee Central, did you have any special interests? Where you a good student? What kind of experience did you have?

JN: John, I had a real bumpy start, like I was telling you about trying to grow up through my adolescent years. I lived a life that was far different from conventional. So, I didn't like school. No, I didn't like school. My interests back then were anything to do with not being in school. Hunting and fishing were my favorite things to do then. My best childhood friend and I, at the age of fifteen, decided it was time for us to go out and leave the family and conquer the world. So, (laughter) that year between my sophomore and junior year, he and I hitchhiked to California, the two of us. It cost us a dollar and seventy-five cents to get there. We had heard big stories about how much money the Okies could make going to California and picking peaches and pears and things like that. Well, we heard you could make fifteen dollars a day. (Laughter) That was all we needed to hear. So, we made the summer out there. I was picking peaches on a sixteen-foot ladder when I turned sixteen (laughter) years old. That was that summer. So, we didn't conquer the world, but we made it through it on our own, no help, and hitchhiked back to Muskogee.

JE: And went back to school.

JN: Went back to school that fall, yes.

JE: Were your parents okay about this journey?

JN: Well, no, they weren't okay about it, but, you know, at that point in time I was too strong headed for 'em to really head me off and they realized that.

JE: Then you entered your junior year and your senior year, and you completed all that?

JN: Yes, I did. We had some hiccups along the road, but yes, I did complete it. And this was before integration, so we were an all-white high school in Muskogee. And I made it through that but that was all the school I wanted. I did, however, enroll in Connor's Agricultural School down in Warner and went there one year. Now, to back up a little bit, I did things that young boys dream about but shouldn't do, and so I got to get married before I was eighteen years old. I was actually a little bit before I was seventeen years old. So, my buddies and I would go back and forth to Conner's every day in a carpool, and I finally said, "you know, I've got a wife and a baby, and I've got to get to work. I've got to do something." I said, "you guys go ahead to do that, I'm not gonna be able to continue on, I'm gonna have to get to work." I didn't have any money, didn't have a car, didn't have a place to live. So, I went to work.

JE: So, you tell your parents that you're gonna get married.

JN: Yes.

JE: Is that a big issue?

JN: (Laughter) Yes, sir.

JE: You'd rather do something else than to tell them that?

JN: Well, I tried to join the Air Force and they wouldn't have me. I was too young.

JE: Oh.

JN: And I tried to run away from it, but you know, I didn't, and so Mary Anne and I got married and she's the mother of my two oldest children. She is now living in Tahlequah, Oklahoma and she's a nice person.

JE: So, then did you earn an income in your parent's nursery?

JN: Oh, yes, I did.

JE: There are more mouths to feed out of that.

JN: Well, I had a wife and a baby. By this time my mom and dad had moved over into their new house they had built, which left the little four room place open. Mary Anne and I moved into that with our little baby, Debra. So, yea, that worked, and made money and not much, but we got by.

JE: You got into a routine?

JN: Got into a routine.

Chapter 04 - 12:58

Idea from California

John T. Nickel: I got an idea while I was working in that little nursery. We were buying some of our plants from the world's largest nursery in California at the time. They grew everything in containers, like buckets, on top of the ground there. And I said, "you know, that's gotta be the coming thing. I wanna get in on that on the ground floor." So, dad and I decided that we would try to grow a few canned plants, they were just in cans back in those days. So, I learned a lot about it. I learned about propagation, about fertility. I learned about spraying insecticides and fungicides and all that stuff. Then I thought, "you know, I could maybe just hang out and do this the rest of my life," but I had built myself a pretty good sized trap that I wasn't real happy with, so I decided that the way for me to do the best I could would be to do something that I could make money at, and I'm talking about I didn't want to be in the retail business in Muskogee, Oklahoma. I was ambitious in those days and so I wanted my marketplace to be in the United States. Which, it is, today. We still carry the name Greenleaf Nursery Company. From there we have four locations; two in Oklahoma, one in El Campo, Texas, and one in Greenville, North Carolina.

John Erling: But you went into a separate location to start this concept.

JN: When I was twenty-one years old, I had this idea, and I was afraid that somebody else was gonna seize it before I got a chance. So, I decided I was gonna travel through the south and find a location where I wanted to put in this container nursery. We called it "container nursery" because everything was in containers rather than in the ground. So, I went all

through the south looking for a location. I got the climate data on each place that I visited. All the way through Arkansas and Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. My favorite place during that whole trip was Asheville, North Carolina. Meanwhile, I had met a guy in Tennessee who was successful in the nursery business. I told him what I was doing. Like I say, I was twenty-one years old, so whether or not he paid much attention to me I don't know, but I guess he did. He said, "I thought about your situation and you need to put that nursery right there where you are at home because there is nobody doing it there, and you have an opportunity for a market all the way through the mid-west." He was right.

JE: Great advice, huh?

JN: Yep, great advice. So, when I was looking for a location to put this thing in Oklahoma, I looked over in the hill area of Eastern Oklahoma because that's where I liked to spend my time. In my time off, I loved the Illinois River. I loved the trees and the hills and the rocks. So, that's where I spent my time looking for a location, and I finally found it right on the bank of Tenkiller Lake; two hundred and thirty acres. I didn't need but about a half an acre, but (laughter) I had big dreams. When I was twenty-two then, I moved away from Muskogee over to that location and lived in a little farm house over there. It didn't have indoor plumbing; put in a bathroom and moved my wife, and by this time I had two children. Got to work. Most of my labor in those days were Cherokee Indians because the hills provided that. The other thing I had to have was water, and another good piece of advice I got was, "for what you're gonna do, I'd wanna be able to see my water. I wouldn't depend on going underground for it. I'd want to see it." So, when I found this location on Tenkiller Lake, I said, "well, there it is." And we weren't looking for a local market. I was looking to produce the plants and sell them in a wholesale manner, so it didn't matter if we were in a market that would buy plants or not because we were gonna ship 'em in semi-trailers to the market.

JE: Did you buy that land?

JN: Yes, we bought the land for one hundred dollars an acre. The owner carried it back. I think we had to put up a couple a thousand dollars and he carried the loan and we paid it off. We still have that land today and we have added quite a bit to it.

JE: Your father was with you then on this, and he bought the concept.

JN: Yes, he was, my father was with me. He did, it was a hard sell. But I told him, I said, "you know, two families can't live out of this little retail nursery," because the biggest gross business year we ever had was \$25,000. Now that's not profit, that's how much business we did. And I said, "we can't do that. We gotta have something bigger than this. So, that's when the idea struck me that, hey, here's an idea that if works, it can set me free.

JE: So, did he invest a few thousand himself to help you with that?

JN: No, we were partners in the retail nursery by then, so I moved over to the new location. The retail nursery subsidized us for the first two or three years because in growing plants it may anywhere from two to eight years for the time you start the plant until you have something to sell. It's a long pipeline. So, we had to have help to keep it going until we were able to have enough product to sell to make it work on its own. Which it did.

JE: What was the advantage of containers?

JN: Growing plants in containers is sort of almost like a factory. You have everything uniform, everything in straight rows. The plants are planted in the container, all the roots are in the container, as opposed to being dug out of the ground where you have to cut the roots off, and the survival of container grown plants is so much better than plants that are grown in the field that have to have the roots cut off. Another advantage was, we could just pick that plant up, we didn't have to get out in the mud with a shovel and did it out of the ground, it was right there ready to go any time of the year. So, those were two big advantages. Disadvantage was that growing plants on top of the ground in containers had a problem with being hardy enough to make it through the winter because the root bulk could freeze solid. The top of the plant would make it fine if it were planted in the ground. But, setting on top of the ground, freezing, the roots wouldn't take. So, we had to figure out some way that we could over-winter these plants and have 'em alive when the spring business came in. The first crop that I had up there, it was small, but the first crop I had all froze to death the first winter. So, had to start over. We said, "well, we'll give this another chance and figure out how we can do it."

JE: Well then, how did you fix it, to provide warmth to those plants?

JN: What we did originally, when we would, what we call "over-winter the plants," we would take bales of straw and nest them in the straw to try to keep the wind and the freeze off the roots. That worked somewhat, but not great, and then the idea of building A-frames and covering them with plastic over a large piece of ground came up and it worked. The reason it worked, not that it didn't frost down there, it did, but it didn't freeze hard because there was so much area covered that the ground warmth kept the plants alive. And that's the way we still do it.

JE: So, that was a huge greenhouse, wasn't it?

JN: Yes, a lot of 'em. I don't know how many we have now, but almost countless. (laughter)

JE: Right, so, that was the answer to that.

JN: Yes.

JE: This idea of containers; did other nursery people sniff around, wondering what you were doing?

JN: Yes, as a matter of fact, they did, and it was such a new thing, one of the local nurseries, Ozark Nursery, Ed Davis was the owner, he said, "well, you're just growing those little

plants in a test tube,” (laughter) and I said, “well, yeah I guess we kind of are.” But, because people found out about it, the horticultural school over at Oklahoma State University would come visit us, and they’d bring students over to see what we were up to. They had one student one student that I always had my eye on, if I could ever afford him, as my replacement because he had a master’s degree in horticulture, which I didn’t. I just learned mine from doing it. He was brilliant. He was a big part of the success of Greenleaf Nursery Company, his name’s Austin Kenyon. When they would bring the class, he was the one in the class that would always ask the correct questions. He was the one that had the curiosity to know, “well, how do you do this, or why do you do that?” I picked him out, I didn’t think I’d ever be able afford him, but I did, and he did so much for Greenleaf Nursery Company.

JE: When he graduated, then he came to work for you?

JN: He graduated and went to work for Oklahoma State University as a professor of horticulture. So, I lured him away and it was a hard lure, (Laughter) when I finally felt confident enough that I could sell him on a program that I thought he could do well for himself. Well, it turns out, that he has done very well for himself.

JE: If you didn’t see he, could you have made that happen anyway?

JN: I could’ve made it happen anyway, and it was happening anyway, but he brought things to the table that I didn’t know. And by this time, by the time I had hired Austin, my brother Gill had decided to come and work for me. He had moved to California and had a civil service job with The Department of the Navy. He graduated from Oklahoma State University with a degree in physics. He couldn’t wait to get to California. He would come back to visit Oklahoma while I was building this nursery, and it was dynamic, and it was happening. You know, he said, “my job is just not happening like this. I told you I never wanted anything to do with this nursery, but could I come back and work here?” and I said, “boy, you’d be welcome to come back. I could sure use some help.” So, he came back, and eventually he became me full partner in the nursery, and then on through life we were partners in just about everything.

JE: Tell me again, when you planted the seed, how long did it take before you could sell that product?

JN: Depends on what the plant is. Somethings you could sell the same year, but we weren’t growing that type of things. That’s the bedding plant business; flowers and stuff for summer. But the stuff we were growing was known as hardy ornamentals. They take, I’m gonna say the shortest time would be three years, and the longest time, they could be eight or nine years old.

JE: So, I’m just trying to figure out, it took you that long to be able to sell those, and in the meantime, you had to be doing something else?

JN: Well, I did, and while I had moved over there, of course in Muskogee being in the retail business, I drew up landscape plans and would sell them to customers. We would plant them. When I got over there, I said, “well, we’ve got to have more income, because the little Muskogee nursery’s not able to keep us alive.” So, I started going over to Northwest Arkansas, which by that time had started to grow and there was some people over there with some money and wanted to have landscaping on their new homes. I would go over there, and I would contact that person. I would draw up a plan, and if I was lucky, I’d sell it to them, and we’d get it done, and we’d collect the money. So, anyway, that’s how it happened.

JE: And then, the plants for that landscape design you brought through your Mom and Pop’s stand?

JN: We did, and a lot of ‘em came from California in containers, so that followed right into what I was trying to do.

JE: Oh, that’s what kept you going until you could finally start selling?

JN: Correct.

JE: That had to be a great day when you decided, “these plants are ready.”

JN: Yes. Well, and the first great day that they were ready they all froze to death. Well, not all of ‘em, but most of ‘em.

JE: Right.

JN: So, the next time I got a chance, we did have something to sell, I would take samples of our crop, our product, to Oklahoma City and Tulsa in the back of my little station wagon. I’d meet with the owner of a retail landscape place in those cities. I’d say, “hey, here’s what we’ve got. We’d like to get your business and we can ship these over to you ta-da, ta-da.” That’s how we got going. So, I would be the guy that grew ‘em, and then I’d be the guy that went out and sold them. (laughter)

JE: Right

JN: And then, when they got sold, and I’d be the guy that was loading the truck to ship ‘em over, and late that night writin’ out an invoice. (laughter)

JE: (laughter) When you went to these retailers, were they receptive to you?

JN: Well, not too bad, not too bad. You know, we had some things that they desired to have. Some of ‘em, I’m sure, were doing it just out of courtesy. But, you know, we built a business there. Then the next thing we did, my dad had got acquainted with a nurseryman up in Sarcoxie, Missouri. He was buying and reselling plants. He was our first re-wholesale customer. We would sell to him wholesale. He’d take a small markup and he’d wholesale ‘em again to the landscaper or the garden center. So, we got a break into Missouri and that led us into Kansas, and Kansas City, and St. Louis, and then all up through the Rust Belt. As the years had gone by, I don’t mean all at once. And, that’s where our business came from.

Chapter 05 - 6:46**John Goes Exploring**

John T. Nickel: Then when my brother became my partner in the nursery, by this time I had made enough money that I could not do that anymore because I had trained my brother and Austin Kenyon. I didn't train Austin, but they were in charge of growing it then, and I had a lot of curiosity to go out and see what the rest of the world was all about, 'cause I'd been doing this since I was eleven years-old. So, I said, "you know, I haven't gotten a chance to really find out what this world is all about." And so, I went to my brother and I said, "Gill, lets sell this business. I'm burned out after all these years, and we can get enough money out of it that we can go do what we want to do." Well, he said, "you know, I haven't had my chance to run it yet." I said, "well, okay. I'm gonna write the manual on how to do it." Which I did, gave him the manual, gave him a bottle of Asprin, and said, "goodbye, call me if you need me." (both laughing) That's the way he took it over.

John Erling: How old were you at this time?

JN: Just past thirty.

JE: Just past thirty and you had made a fair amount of coin, hadn't you?

JN: I had, and I was very fortunate. I mean, I can't take all the credit for it. I started the ball rollin' but I've had fabulous people pushing that ball down the hill ever since.

JE: By the time you were thirty then, you had expanded to all those other towns that you talked about earlier?

JN: No, we had not. We were still just in the location where I originally started.

JE: But you were doing business in Kansas City, and...?

JN: But we were doing business up through that part of the country, yes. And locally, in Tulsa, Oklahoma City. You know, you have to go to the population areas to sell plants. Gill took it over. He was very ambitious also, so he wanted to build a nursery in Texas. And he and Austin Kenyon built that nursery in Texas without my help, (laughter) but I had gotten 'em on the road. Then, after that, then, we decided, "well, let's see if we can get a place in North Carolina." We did that. In the meantime, my brother called me after he had run it for about five or six years and he said, "well, it's your turn," and I said, "well, I didn't expect to have another turn this soon, but okay. What are you gonna do?" He said, "I wanna live in a city somewhere. I wanna either live in New York or Paris or San Francisco. And I want you to come back and get this thing rollin' and take it over and let me go do my thing. You got to go do yours." I said, "okay."

JE: In the meantime, this young family that you started, are they still with you at thirty?

JN: Yes.

JE: So, you've been raising the family, and you're thirty years old?

JN: Right.

- JE:** So, all is good there. You talked about Asheville. Did you just go there because you liked the area? Because, it is beautiful. Is that why you went?
- JN:** No, we didn't put our nursery in Asheville. When we did do one in North Carolina, we did it over on the other side of the state, over on the east side of the state, in Greenville. But I always loved North Carolina. I'm a guy that loves nature scenery and beauty and things like that, and so those are the kind of places that always appeal to me.
- JE:** When was the first time you bought your first semi-truck.
- JN:** Oh, well, we didn't buy our first one, we would hire contract haulers in the beginning. So, it was quite a while before we bought our own. We would preferred not to have gone into the trucking business and it worked out real good for these guys to come to our nursery, we'd load the truck up, they'd haul it for so many cents a mile, use their own rigs, get it delivered; but finally, after it got bigger and bigger, we couldn't depend on those contract haulers, so we had to buy our own trucks. We used those mostly for something you could get to in one day. And we still do contract hauling to the East Coast, and up into New England, and a little bit into Canada.
- JE:** So, you were in the trucking business?
- JN:** We were, we had to get into the trucking business.
- JE:** And so, today, how many trucks are going out from that place?
- JN:** The busy season, which is, of course, the spring time, in Oklahoma starts in middle March and in all through April, and May, and in a part of June, and we have to get everything out the door in that short a period of time. So, now that is nursery is this size, just out of the Oklahoma nursery, we'll load thirty to thirty-five semi-trucks a day...
- JE:** Wow.
- JN:** and ship them out. It's a big deal.
- JE:** Yes, it is a big deal. (both laughing) It is a big deal.
- JN:** And, it's gotten to be a very big nursery.
- JE:** Back to then, when you left the nursery.
- JN:** Uh-huh
- JE:** Where did you go to play?
- JN:** You know, I went to play in Colorado. I loved Colorado, and I learned about skiing, and I said, "oh, boy, now there's what I wanna do." So, I had a residence in Vail, Colorado for several years, not that I was living there fulltime, because I kept my Oklahoma residence. I was back and forth to the nursery during those years, but I didn't have day-to-day duties. The, into California, which is another long story. That's what I wanted to do, so I did that and then wound up having a residence in Aspen and then on through the years came back to Oklahoma, back to the roots, and here I am.
- JE:** And came back to Greenleaf?
- JN:** Yes.

- JE:** And your brother said, “it’s time for me to leave,” and so, then you came back to...
- JN:** I did, and my mother was up in years by then and she somebody to kind of be there for her, and so, I took on that job. Meanwhile, my two older kids were already grown, and they’re on their own by then. So, they didn’t need my help so much. My mother did, and the nursery did, and it didn’t, because we had it going good and we had good people who kept it going. And, our president of the nursery right now, Randy Davis, has been with us since he was a kid in high school pulling weeds out of the containers and he’s worked his way all the way from that to the president of the company.
- JE:** Wow.
- JN:** He’s great. So, because of people like that, that I’ve been able to get to help, I’ve been very fortunate, and I know that.
- JE:** So, then you’re overseeing Greenleaf?
- JN:** From a distance, but I had written the manual.
- JE:** Right.
- JN:** And they followed it for a number of years before they outsmarted me.
- JE:** Then, your mother eventually passed away?
- JN:** She did. Mom passed away when she was ninety-two. I had lost my dad way back, when he was only seventy. He had two or three strokes, and the last one took him out. I was telling you about my dad joining Alcoholics Anonymous, and he’s one of the few people that I know of, that I’ve seen, turn his life around to the degree he did, and he became the President of the American Association of Nurserymen.
- JE:** Wow.
- JN:** Starting from being drunk. (laughter)
- JE:** Yeah, yeah.
- JN:** As far as I know, he never had another drink after he sobered up.
- JE:** And you’re awfully proud of him, and that story?
- JN:** Yes.
- JE:** Yeah, you should be.

Chapter 06 - 4:25

The Wine Business

John Erling: Then, when your mother passes, you’re not needed there?

John T. Nickel: Well, by this time, brother Gill actually chose San Francisco to live, bought an old home on Nob Hill. Down in the depths of that old home there was some old wine

making equipment from the turn of the century. Well, he didn't even drink wine. He never had a drink of wine until after he was thirty years old. So, I had to teach him how to do that. Of course, I was a good teacher and he was a good student. (laughter). So, he decided that he's going to try going into the wine business and started right there in San Francisco and bought enough grape juice to make a barrel of wine in his cellar on Nob Hill. Okay, so, he entered that little wine in the county fair and won a bronze medal. Well, he said, "maybe I think I've found the truth here." So, he decided to really learn about it. He went over to the University of California at Davis, which is the wine school, probably in the world. He would commute over there from San Francisco, monitored the classes, not for a degree, but to learn how to make wine and grow grapes. He made another barrel or two in the cellar and he called me one night, and he said, "well, I'm ready to go commercial with this thing and I want you to come do it with me." I said, "Gill, I don't know anything about making wine. What are you talking about?" And he said, "well, I didn't know anything about the nursery and you taught me that and I can teach you this." I said, "well, okay, here we go." (laughter) So, I then up a residence in Marin County and Gill and I, 1979, made our first commercial wine. We had a warehouse in Sausalito, California where we hauled the grape juice in, fermented the grapes, and took it from there. As luck would have it, our first vintage of Chardonnay wine hit the market and really was a big hit. Why? I don't know. But anyway, it was, and so, here we go. Meanwhile, he had found this old building up in Napa Valley that was abandoned during prohibition, and his dream was to have an old stone winery, like the old times. And so, the wine business was his baby, the nursery was my baby. But I went into the business with him, and now we're full partners in the winery.

JE: What was the labels on the bottles you sold?

JN: The first label that we had, and we didn't sell it under this label. But we came up with a design for a label called "Nob Hill Cellars." That's because that's where his first experiment of wine was made. Meanwhile, he had found the old stone building up in Napa Valley and made a deal with the heir to the selling estate to get that property. So, one day we were in Sausalito in our office and we looked at each other and said, "why are we gonna put out a wine by the name of 'Nob Hill Cellars,' when we're never gonna use that name again now that we have this old stone building carved in stone, carved in stone, says, 'Far Niente.'" So, we made a label called "Far Niente." We worked hard to design that label with a stained-glass artist named Tom Rodrigues. Tom was an art nouveau kind of an artist.

JE: So, you thought up the name "Far Niente?"

JN: No, we didn't think it up, it was there, and it had been carved above one of the doors since 1885.

JE: Okay.

JN: So that was the name of it. A friend of mine said, “you’ll never sell a wine by the name of that in America.” I said, “well, whether we can or not, that is the name of it.”

JE: Well, it’s Italian.

JN: It’s Italian.

JE: And what does it mean?

JN: And *far niente* means, literally, “to do nothing,” but there was a saying at the turn of the century, *dolce far niente*, which means, “it’s sweet to do nothing.”

JE: That’s great. So, did Gill learn to drink wine? Did he enjoy it?

JN: He did. Oh, he took to it after he learned how. In his early life, his determination was that he was gonna be a Baptist Minister. Something turned him away from that and he was in Baylor. I think maybe even was ordained, but he decided to change that to something else. He never did tell me the full story about it, but anyway then he enrolled in Oklahoma State University and graduated there.

JE: So, is that the church you grew up in, the Baptist church?

JN: Yes, and he did too.

JE: And the whole family was...

JN: Mom and Dad weren’t church goers, but Gill and I were back in those days. I mean I had to come a longways to get into that, but he was there from the beginning.

Chapter 07 - 7:54

Growing a Good Grape

John Erling: About the wine experience, so many people drink wine and it’s a real curious thing.

John T. Nickel: It is.

JE: I don’t drink wine. My wife does, but I’m very curious about it. What surprised you about making wine? Was it more difficult or not as difficult?

JN: It is not near as difficult as the nursery business, but it isn’t easy either, and there’s a lot of things that can go wrong. The first thing you have to have is really good fruit. You can take a really good fruit and ruin it, but you can’t take a really bad fruit and make something good out of it. You have to at least figure out to get the fruit. And so, when we got the old building fixed back up to the codes of California for the earthquake stuff, then we also bought vineyards and grew our own grapes. But, before that we were buying grapes from other growers, and we would only buy the best grapes.

JE: Well then here your experience at Greenleaf came to play.

JN: Yes.

JE: And that of kind of energized you too. I get to play in the dirt again.

JN: Yes, it did, very much so. Then, by the time the old stone winery was rehabbed for commercial use, I moved into one of the rooms at the winery. That was my residence for a while. Of course, I still had my residence in Colorado, and my real home of all time, was Oklahoma, but I lived up there for a while. Then Gill and I bought another winery together, called "Chateau Cheval lay." I lived in that old chateau up there for a year while we replanted all the vineyards up there. That was an old stone French-style winery. And, (laughter) it was full of bats up in the belfry. So, I lived in there for a year and got that done. The thing never did really take off like our other project, Far Niente, so eventually we sold it.

JE: What's the best soil for fruit?

JN: There not necessarily a best soil. Grapes produce a better fruit on poorer soil than they do on real good soil. So, probably the best fruit comes from the rocky hill sides where the grape has to struggle. It produces a richer berry up there to make wine from. Now, that's not how we do it. We grow ours in the valley floor. We have several vineyards out there now. I say "we." I'm not longer involved in it, but my son, Eric, is. It's a lot about how to prune the, you have to learn how to prune them, how to spray them, how to put them on the right kind of a trellis. There's just a lot involved in growing a good grape.

JE: Are they a sensitive plants?

JN: They can be very sensitive. When they're blooming in the spring. If you happen to get the bad luck of a frost up in Napa Valley, you can lose your crop. Then, of course, as with everything else, there's always some bug or something after it, so you have to learn how to deal with that.

JE: Face some of the same things as farmers?

JN: Some of the very same things that I've been dealing with.

JE: Yeah. When it comes tom the harvest, what is the hardest part of a harvest?

JN: Hardest part of the harvest for us because us, because we didn't use machines to harvest our grapes, we wanted really high quality, unbruised fruit, to go into our wines because we were shooting for a world class wine. Not just a central valley California wine, but a world class wine. So, the hardest part was getting grape pickers because they would have to go out there and pick the cluster of grapes, put 'em in a basket, haul 'em to the truck, take 'em to wherever they go to get crushed. So, that, difficult trying to keep labor involved on that of a situation. Whereas a lot of the big wineries harvest by machines, but we never did that.

JE: Even to this day?

JN: Even to this day, we hand sort all of our grapes. We run 'em down a conveyor line and have people standing there looking at them and picking out and throwing away the ones that don't look right.

- JE:** Is that a lost process anymore in the wine business?
- JN:** Well, the reason it's not a lost process, is because you're producing a higher value wine, and you get it back, and then some.
- JE:** Most vineyards probably aren't doing that?
- JN:** A lot of the big vineyards are not. The small vineyards, yes, they are.
- JE:** Alright, so today, a bottle of Far Niente is worth what?
- JN:** Retail Far Niente in Tulsa, Far Niente Cabernet, now that's the most expensive, is probably \$135.00. Now, that same wine in a restaurant will be double that. I don't know exactly what the numbers on that are, but that's the way it is. We go through a distributor and sell our wines to the distributor. The distributor then sells 'em to the restaurants, and the restaurant marks it up whatever they feel like they need to. You can get a Far Niente Cabernet for, oh, I'm sure there's some out there for five hundred dollars if you want to spring for that.
- JE:** Depending on the age?
- JN:** Depending on the age and the year of the vintage, how good of a reputation it has and all of that. We make three wines at the Far Niente vineyard. We make the Cabernet. We make the Chardonnay, which is the first wine Gill and I made, and the Chardonnay probably would sell on they retail market in Tulsa for about eighty-five or ninety dollars a bottle. But, then the cheap wines, the ones that are machine harvested, maybe they're bringing ten or twelve dollars a bottle. So, you can see that there's a lot of upside to trying to produce the best.
- JE:** Right. There must be something that you had done, I mean first of all you picked the fruit. So, you got the best fruit.
- JN:** Yes.
- JE:** Is there anything else that you're doing different than anybody else to put you in that high class?
- JN:** Well, like I say, the way you handle the fruit, once it's picked, then it gets crushed, then it goes into the fermenting tank, and then you have to have expert wine maker that know how to get the best out of that juice. They can ruin it, or they can make good wine out of it depending on how it started out. But not everybody can do that. We have good wine makers.
- JE:** So, is that the most critical part, right there?
- JN:** That, that, yeah, I'd say that is the most critical part, once you get the grape harvested, yeah.
- JE:** What's the best wine glass?
- JN:** Best wine glass?
- JE:** Yes.

JN: Well, they have different shaped glasses for different kinds of wine. The Chardonnay and the Pinot Noir is a shape more like a tulip, where the Cabernet is shaped more straight sided. And, thin glass, I don't know why that is, but it just makes the wine taste better.

JE: Really?

JN: Yes.

JE: (Laughter) Are you amused when people in restaurants and they taste and (laughter) do they really know what they're doing when they're trying to taste and probably turn away two or three wines?

JN: You know, in the years that we've be in it, people've learned a lot about wine, and there are some definite people in the United States that know what their looking for and how to taste it, everybody know. But it's become more and more popular, and it's a romance business, and people get involved in it, they get fascinated by it. A lot of people like to learn about it, they like to know, "well, what kinda grape is this, and what year was it grown, and where was it grown?" You know?

JE: Well, here I am not a wine drinker, and I'm asking these questions because it is fascinating for sure.

JN: It is.

JE: Are you a wine drinker today?

JN: You know, I do drink some wine, but not near the amount of wine you would think I do. I have a lot of wine on hand. I have a lot of friends that love it, and I love it occasionally, but I don't drink a lot of it.

JE: All I remember is way back when, when I did have some wine, it gave me a terrific headache.

JN: Well, and yes, yes. Some people are allergic to it. My wife can't drink wine at all. I told her, I said, "well, you know, the only think I get any kind of a deal on is wine, and you can't drink it."

JE: (laughter)

Chapter 08 - 6:54

Boyhood Dreams

John Erling: You've got this winery going, you've got the nursery going, somewhere in there you tried to retire, and you couldn't, didn't want to, you had to be busy all the time. Where am I bringing to now when you finally decide you're going to leave the winery?

John T. Nickel: Yes, and come back to Oklahoma. For the reasons I told you before.

JE: Right.

JN: But there were two pieces of property that became available after me wanting to be able to buy them for years and years and years; one of 'em since I was eighteen years old, and the other one since I was probably twenty-three, or four. And, they came available the same year, 1989. So, that put me back in Oklahoma, and I became the owner of both of those two properties. That, with my mother, and the business, the nursery business, and everything else, we raise cattle on the ranches, and, of course, we make our own hay. We have our own cowboys, we have Quarter Horses at one time. My wife and I showed Quarter Horses. In fact, we had the World Champion Palomino Mare one year, that we showed. After we had children then that fell away so we still have some horses, but we're not in the business of showing horses anymore.

JE: Are you talking about the Caney Creek Ranch?

JN: Yes, Caney Creek Ranch.

JE: And, there was a J-5 Ranch?

JN: And the J-5 Ranch. Both of those properties became available the same year. So, I was fortunate enough to, by this time, be able to buy them.

JE: So, this is ground that you had been looking at as a youngster?

JN: Very young, yes.

JE: We also want to talk about the fourteen thousand acres that you bought.

JN: That was originally named the "J-5 Ranch" and we had a sign at the road that goes into the ranch. "This is a working cattle ranch. A nature and wildlife reserve. Please respect the boundaries. No trespassing. No Hunting." Well, I had that for a number of years, and we've had good times together in cattle up there on horseback, and one of the things I love to do back then, and I had my cowboys up there and we took that property and really made a showplace of it. I named it the J-5 Ranch. When I first started the nursery over in Cherokee County, one of my Cherokee employees, old man named Tom Blackbird, decided since my name was Nickel, that he was gonna call me "John Five Cents." And, so I named the ranch "J" for John and "5" for five cents. So, that was the J-5, and then after a number of years up there, the Nature Conservancy came to me and said, "we're looking for a really nice undeveloped parcel of land that we can have a preserve on in the Western Ozarks, because there's not anything available. Said, "you've got the only one that's not developed and it's all in one piece." So, I was called into the offices of Mr. Bob Norton who was on the board of the Nature Conservancy. We had a big meeting up there one day and they told me that the Nature Conservancy would sure like to own that property, and what they were gonna do with it. And I told 'em, I said, "well, you're gonna make a nature and wildlife reserve out of it, which is what I'm already doing, I do run cattle up there on a small part of it, but how's it going to be any different from what I'm already doing?" One of the guys up there was at that time the Director of the Tallgrass Prairie.

JE: Was that Harvey Payne?

JN: Harvey Payne, yes, it was Harvey. Harvey said, “well, John, what’s gonna happen to it when you die? You love that land and you don’t want to see it developed, but how are you going to keep it from being developed?” Well, I said, “you know, hadn’t really thought much about dying today, Harvey, but...” I gave that a lot of thought and I decided that because I have such a passion for those hills along the Illinois River, that I decided that I was gonna just give it to them over a period of years. Which I have done. I’ve given it all to them now. So, that’s how that came to be.

JE: Let’s talk about the exact location.

JN: Yes.

JE: Where is it?

JN: East of the Illinois River along the river and in fact parts of it are in the river. Northeast of Tahlequah. The front entrance to it is probably twelve miles northeast of Tahlequah.

JE: What counties would they be in.

JN: It’s in Cherokee County, and then some of it in Adair County. Most of it’s in Cherokee County.

JE: I’m fascinated with the story that you saw that ground and remember it when you were very young.

JN: When I went to Connor’s College, which was an agricultural school, they took us on a field trip one day up to what they call the Bonner Ranch. They were spraying timber up there and they wanted us to see what happens when you spray the timber. The native bluestem grasses are laying dormant in there for years and years and years and they spring back to life when there’s no competition from the brush and the timber. They took us up there to see that place, and I fell in love with that place. I thought to myself, “wow, if I ever had a chance to own something like this, I’d make it into a refuge for the wildlife and nature.”

JE: So, that’s the dream of a, uh, how old?

JN: About eighteen years-old.

JE: Eighteen year old dream?

JN: Yep.

JE: And then?

JN: I kept that one under my hat until I was fifty-four years old.

JE: And then the ranch too, that land...

JN: And then the other one...

JE: You had been looking at that as well when you were younger?

JN: The Caney Creek Ranch, yes. It was owned by a politician from Orange County, California, Dennis Carpenter, and his wife, Oleta. Dennis had a need to sell the property. It had never come available before and I didn’t have the money available before either, so, it kinda worked out to be a real benefit for both him and me. So, we became partners in

part of the land, not all of it, but part of the land and the cattle. A few years ago, Dennis passed away. I bought his heirs out. So, now I own all of the Caney Creek Ranch. And Caney Creek is the creek that runs through the ranch. It runs on into Lake Tenkiller about, oh, five or six miles down from my fence line on Caney Creek.

JE: Well then tell us about how the purchase of the fourteen thousand acres come about? Was somebody willing to sell right away?

JN: Yeah, when I first saw that ranch, Mr. Bonner from Texas, had put together over forty thousand acres. Well, the part I bought, the fourteen thousand acres that I bought in 1989, came available from the then owner who had a, maybe some money problems or something, and needed to sell it. So, I came along and I (laughter) I'd already dreamed about owning that place for a long long time. So, he and I struck a deal and I got it. I bought it.

JE: Little did you know that you were making money, not for that particularly, you just enjoyed making money, enjoyed being in business, and it all came back to that.

JN: It did. You're right, it did.

Chapter 09 - 6:13

Nature and Wildlife Preserve

John Erling: Now, I was reading about the J.T. Nickel Family Nature and Wildlife Preserve.

John T. Nickel: Yes.

JE: That's the proper name for it?

JN: Yes.

JE: Is the largest privately protected conservation area in the Ozarks. Seventeen-thousand-acre landscape rests in Eastern Oklahoma's rolling Cookson Hills and overlooks the Illinois River. Spring-fed creeks meander amid a rugged topography of steep slopes and narrow valleys, harboring a mosaic of oak-hickory forest, lofty pine woodland, and a diverse mix of savanna, shrubland, and prairie. Somebody is a very good writer, but it obviously describes that acreage.

JN: Yes, yes it does. I took my cattle out when I gave it to the conservancy, and one thing I wanted to see up there were some elk. Now, elk used to be native to Oklahoma. The last one was killed out sometime around the mid-eighteen-hundreds. There had been some brought to the state, but I wanted to bring some up there and have that as our flagship animal up there. So, we did. I think the first group was about twenty elk. We've had a lot of trouble with them wandering off the property and getting shot and killed by poachers and

this and that, but we still have a nice herd up there right now. They've probably, at one time, was up to about seventy-five and now probably down to about forty-five because of the poaching and so forth. But, anyway, it's really, really nice to see, and people love to see the elk.

JE: The public is invited to come to the preserve?

JN: The can always come to the preserve. They can't necessarily raise cane up there do what they want to do, but they've got to be respectful of what the Nature Conservancy stands for.

JE: You've got a beautiful guest house there.

JN: We do, it's our Visitor's Center. Yeah, it's real nice. We got that done after I had given the property to them a few years. We decided, "well, lets do one little development on this whole property, and let's make it the Visitor's Center." Which we did, and it's really, really nice.

JE: Well, I saw it online and yeah, it does look beautiful. The Nature Conservancy up in Osage County, people can drive through that, but they can't to this?

JN: They can drive all across the middle of this.

JE: Okay.

JN: There is a open county road across the middle of the preserve.

JE: Alright. You have walking paths?

JN: We also have created some walking paths and some signage that tells you what to expect to see and this and that. So, people are welcome to come up there and do that. And, as time goes along, it'll get more and more use. They're not welcome to come up and camp overnight and build fires and things like that. They're not welcome to come up and hunt. They're not welcome to come up and vandalize. But, the kind of people that love nature are not that kind of people anyway, and so those are the kind of visitors we get. We also get visitors from schools. They come there to see it. My goal in mind for the preserve was to take it back to where it was when settlers first came to Oklahoma and have a big enough parcel of land to show people what the country was like before it got developed. That's what I wanted, and that's what we're doing, and they are not allowed to sell it. They're not allowed to trade it. We have a contract going into, not eternity, but (laughter) forever more, that they will take care of it, protect it, and do what we requested that be done.

JE: You could've sold that off to developers salivating right now about that land.

JN: Yes, and they are, and they can't have it. (both laughing)

JE: I was reading here about biodiversity treats in the area include habitat loss and fragmentation.

JN: Yes.

JE: Fire exclusion over the past several decades is also led to the decliner loss of a host of plants and animals. Can you comment on that?

JN: Yes. Before the white settlers got here, it had been Indian Territory. They were moved there in 1835, and they were in Cherokee County. A lot of that land was theirs, but they weren't subsidized by the government in those days. They had to make a living their way, and a lot of the way that they made their living was harvesting wild game. And, one of the ways that they could get the wild game within shooting range was to burn areas and when the green, lush grass came up in the spring the animals would show up. So, during all those years the place did get burned off. Then later on, when everybody didn't want to have any more fires, then it quit happening. So, the open areas that were burned off back in those days became covered back over with scrub oak and so forth. Now, we do have prescribed burns happening up there as they do on the Tallgrass Prairie, and every year or every two years we will burn an area and then we'll let that thing rest for two or three years, and the maybe come back and burn it again. We try do it in the same way that it was done through history, and kinda follow that regimen in today's world. So, by burning things off like that, it creates more habitat and food for wild animals.

JE: The Nature Preservatory in Osage, that's just open land, bluestem grass, and all that kind of thing. But what you have is more trees, isn't it?

JN: We have mostly trees, that's right.

JE: So, when you're burning, you're burning trees?

JN: Yes, that happens but we try to have a prescribed burn and not burn in such a as to kill the trees but to get rid of the underbrush, so the sun can get to the ground and start growing herbs back like they did way back. Way back the Ozarks were pretty open underneath back in the burning days. So, we've recreated that.

JE: It says, "The Nickel Preserve is perhaps the last landscape-scale opportunity to address these threats in the Oklahoma Ozarks by protecting and restoring a fully-functioning ecosystem." You're one of the lasts that actually does that. That has to make you feel good.

JN: Oh, it does, very good, because I have a passion for those hills and trees and rocks and wild things and clear streams.

Chapter 10 - 4:30

There Was a Plan

John Erling: Do you ever think that somebody wrote a plan for your life? (laughter)

John T. Nickel: Well, you know, John, I've been so fortunate and so blessed in my life, I don't exactly understand why, but maybe there was a plan. I think probably there was, and I'm a type person that believes "things happen for a reason" and nothing happens without something, some mind or something causing it to happen.

JE: You were constantly laying the plan...

JN: Yes.

JE: And following it, unbeknownst to you, all along to this place that you're living in now.

JN: That's correct.

JE: You want to mention your wife today, the mother of two children?

JN: Yes, like I told you, my life got off to a kind of rough and tumble start, so I hate to tell you this, but by the time I was seventeen I had a wife and a baby. My first baby was born at age seventeen. My last child, which is living here in Tulsa with me now, Landon Nickel, was born when I was seventy years-old, so I was seventeen (laughter) for starts, seventy when some people say, "well, I guess you're through now," and I said, "well, I guess so." (both laughing)

JE: And, what's your wife's name?

JN: Julie. Julie and I have been married for twenty-two years this past January 2nd. She's the mother of my two youngest children. Landon's twelve, and Landon's sister, Julie's first baby, Makenzie, is nineteen, and this is her first year at the University of San Diego.

JE: Julie shared interest in horses and in nature and all. Is that what brought you together?

JN: More so, that brought us together, I think, was the horse thing. I was always fascinated by that and I never had gotten to have a proper horse place, so we built a proper horse place and she showed horses, both Western riding, and English riding, and I showed Halter horses, you know, that's the kind of the beauty contests for horses. I did a little bit of the riding part, but mostly she did that.

JE: I was talking to somebody the other day about horses. Will a horse bond, say to you, like a dog bonds to us?

JN: I have not had that experience and I think there are people that have had that experience. A local lady, Kristen Glover, has had that experience. She has had horses bond to her. Mostly, horses just do what they do, and that's graze. (laughter) They learned how to run real fast to get away from trouble, and sometimes if you feed them and you're the person that deals with 'em, you can whistle 'em up out of the pasture, and they'll come up to ya, and yeah, I think they do have that kind of a bonding with ya. They're not like a dog though.

JE: Do they learn their name?

JN: Yes, they do. You know, they're a lot smarter than we give 'em credit for.

JE: I was gonna ask you how smart a horse is.

JN: Here's where they're smart; they're real smart about what they want. They're real smart about how to get what they want. They're not so much smart about what we want them to know (laughter) But, they're real smart about what they want to know. Dogs included.

JE: Yes. (laughter) That's right. We always talk about a horse that run into a burning barn, is that true?

JN: (laughter) I don't know how horses evolved to this point. I don't know how they live through all that stuff, because they are (laughter) they are a disaster waiting to happen.

And, they can get sick and they can get hurt in some of the weirdest ways. When you raise horses, you just come to expect it. They're gonna get hung up in the fence, or they're gonna get colic. (laughter) They're gonna get this or gonna get that. They just have their own way, and they did evolve and they learned how to live.

JE: Well, then that does lead us to questioning their brain powers at times, right?

JN: I'm not sure how to answer that, but you know, we have dogs here that live with us here at this home, and they're smart. They know a lot, and they are a lot more responsive to me than horses have ever been. Now, I don't want to exclude that for people like Kristen. Now, she's gifted in that area.

JE: Is she your horse whisperer? (laughter)

JN: Yeah, I think so. She's been world champion many times.

JE: So much of this I've enjoyed because I came off a farm in North Dakota and wheat and potatoes and all that kind of stuff, and we had a horse. So, it's fascinating to talk about these things with you.

JN: Well, good, and it is for me too and I've very glad to get a chance to meet you and learn about you.

JE: Thank you.

Chapter 11 - 4:00

Both Sides of the Track

John Erling: Okay, you're a young man. You're eighty-two years old.

John T. Nickel: Eighty-two years, yes.

JE: And, you're involved with business today, doing things and making things happen?

JN: Right, yep, right.

JE: As you look back, is there any one particular thing or two things that you're really most proud of?

JN: Well, you know, of course I'm proud of our nursery. Yes, I'm very proud of that, I'm very proud of the J-5, now the Nature Conservancy's property. I'm proud of Caney Creek Ranch, my childhood friend, Dave Whitlock, who is a world expert fly fisherman, and I have built a little trout stream on Caney Creek Ranch. Dave lives on the ranch now. I'm real proud of that. It's beautiful. The winery, of course, that worked too. Like I say, "I've been blessed, and I've had lots of good things happen." My oldest kids, I told you, their mother lives in Tahlequah. My third child, Eric, is living in California. He's involved in the wine business like I used to be. He also does rehab building, and he's real fascinated with

taking old properties and fixin' 'em up, which I am too, but his mother passed away last year. And then Julie, with our two younger children, she and I are right here together in mid-town Tulsa.

JE: You come from nothing, almost.

JN: Well, I wouldn't say that. As it turned out, my mother was an excellent person. My father turned out to be an excellent person. So, I didn't come from nothing, but as far as financially, yeah.

JE: Somewhat meager?

JN: Meager, yeah.

JE: And now, you've come into the category of a wealthy person?

JN: I've seen both sides of the tracks, John, and I like this side a lot better.

JE: (laughter) When you sensed that happening to you, was that when you were thirty and you wanted to leave Greenleaf and go to California, and somewhere along the line, you must have thought, "wow, this is happening to me, and I can feel the wealth that's gonna come to me?"

JN: Well, you always have doubts that, well, it can't really happen, but, "I think it's gonna happen, but not really." You know, you're always wonder.

JE: But it did, and so there's days when you thought, "wow, this is going to happen to me."

JN: It did. Yeah, oh, absolutely. I don't know how it happened, John, but it did. (laughter)

JE: Do you think wealth changes a person to any degree?

JN: I do, definitely.

JE: And, how?

JN: Well, it changes your priorities for one thing, and once you have your money made, you can be a lot more generous and giving, I think. Whereas, when you were trying to make it, you were pretty tight fisted. Just trying to get it done. Yeah, I think it changes you in that way, I think you become more sensitive to the needs and desires of others. Havin' money is just a lot easier than not having it.

JE: I think that people like yourself, who actually made your money, you earned it...

JN: Yes.

JE: As opposed to the next generation who comes along and didn't earn it but received it.

JN: I call 'em "trust-funders." They never actually earned the money, but it was gifted to them, and a lot of 'em don't turn out so well. Now, there's some that do. They use it as a spring board, but a lot of 'em use it as a auger down. I've seen a lot of that. Did I tell you that I have two grandchildren as well?

JE: No.

JN: Okay, I have two grandchildren. My daughter, Brenda in Tahlequah, has a son, Weston, and he's thirty-one, or be this month. And, then I have a granddaughter who grew up in Laguna Beach, California with my oldest daughter, her name's Olivia, and she's thirty.

JE: You're in place you could be a great-grandfather pretty soon.

JN: Coulda been a long time ago (both laughter). I urged them not to make that happen too early. My mother had a great saying about that when she became a great-grandmother. She came up to me one day and she said, "John, you know, it didn't bother me being a grandmother or it didn't even bother me being a great-grandmother, but the very idea that I'm the mother of a grandfather kinda gets to me."

JE: (laughter) Right.

Chapter 12 - 4:00

John's Brother

John Erling: Any advice that you would give to college students, maybe they want to be in business, any kind of business, what would you say to them?

John T. Nickel: Well, the first important thing, is you have to have a goal. You have to have a purpose. You have to have a direction. The first thing I would do is I'd get out a piece of paper and a pencil, and I'd sit there, and I'd ask myself the question, "what do I wanna do with my life?" And, I'd start answering that question, and then from that I'd build a goal out of it, and that probably will make it happen. There's a lot of other things, but if you have a goal and if you're sincere and passionate about it, you will achieve it.

JE: Passion is a big key to this, isn't it?

JN: Yes.

JE: Because you were passionate about those plants.

JN: Yes, yes, I was.

JE: Is there anything I haven't asked, anything you'd like to say? (laughter)

JN: Well, you know, I may have told you more than you want to know, but anyway, I've tried to tell you how my life was. I don't mean to paint a bad picture of my father. He just had that problem, and he got over it, and he mastered it, and that's what really gave me the inspiration. I didn't learn how to live life until I was pretty old and had already made some money, then it came to me that there's a better way to live that's sustainable and honorable.

JE: Yeah, well, about your father, it's admiration.

JN: Right, exactly.

JE: People that listen to this, it's admiration.

JN: Exactly.

JE: Because most families can be affected by alcoholism, and some make it, and some don't, and those who do, you admire them.

JN: Yes, and I hesitated to tell you that story, but that is a big part of the story.

JE: Yeah.

JN: As I told you, my brother and I were partners in just about everything we did. He passed away when he was only sixty-four and a half years old. That's been, I believe, fourteen years ago. And, of course, I miss him, and everybody else does too, because he was one of the great characters I've ever known. But anyway, he and I rode motorcycles together. We decided one year that we were gonna get tickets to the 1968 Olympics, which was held in Mexico City. Well, we left our home in Park Hill, Oklahoma (laughter) on our motorcycles, and we rode to the Olympics in Mexico City, and we crisscrossed across Mexico. We got down there, saw the Olympics, by this time the nursery had started to do a lot better. So, we could be gone for a little while. So, Gill said, "let's ride on farther, let's go on down into Central America." Well, we had to figure out if we could get a passport to do that. As it turned out, we did, and we got an emergency passport through a Mexican fellow that had befriended us there. We rode those motorcycles all the way to the Panama Canal.

JE: Wow.

JN: (Laughter)

JE: What a thrill.

JN: What a trip it was, and there's so many adventures there. Another thing Gill and I did, we were both at the nursery, we raced canoes. We were the Oklahoma State Canoe Champions two years in a row.

JE: How close you were as brother, sixty-four, what was it that took him?

JN: Melanoma.

JE: Hmm, that's because he was out in the sun a lot?

JN: Yeah, we didn't know any better when we were young than to get all our clothes off that we could get off in public.

JE: Right.

JN: And just be out in the sun all the time.

JE: Yeah.

JN: Barefoot and in the sun.

JE: And it took him and not you.

JN: Well, I've had my problems with it as well, but so far, I'm still here.

JE: So, you have fought it?

JN: Yeah, I have. He told me that he had it. He said, "you know, I feel like I'm getting cheated out of twenty years of my life." But he said, "better on this end than the front end."

JE: Yeah.

JN: He was a good guy who was funny.

JE: That's great. Well, thank you, John. I have enjoyed this immensely and we get to know each other, be able to come into this beautiful home, now your story is preserved forever in voicesofoklahoma.com and I thank you for this session.

JN: Well, thank you so much, John, and really enjoyed getting to meet you and visiting with you. **JE:** Thank you, very much.

Chapter 13 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research, and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.