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Abstract: Robert (Bobby) Wieneke was born on September 14th, 1961 in Hardin Illinois, and grew up on the family's 80 acre farm, an apple orchard in rural Calhoun County, near Brussels, Illinois. Bobby is the fifth generation to farm the land, his great-great grandfather emigrating to the region from Hanover, Germany in the mid 19th century. Bobby discussed how the farm evolved as it passed from generation to generation. The interview took place at his father Leroy's home, the same farm house and barn in use by the family since the 1800s. When the local apple market began to diminish due to the availability of fruit from large operations, Leroy and Booby elected to switch from apples to peaches. In recent years, Bobby added several varieties of wine grapes as well. At the time of the interview, the family has several acres of peaches, (multiple varieties which allows for a staggered harvest), as well several varieties of grapes. Bobby spoke in detail about his plans for the future. He is renovating an historic old home he recently purchased, and intends to market his own wine, including peach wine, from the renovated building.

Keywords: Growing up on the farm; multiple generational farms; Calhoun County, Illinois; Leroy Wieneke; apple orchards; peach orchards; maintenance of grape vines; wine making; home renovation

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Interview with Bob Wieneke

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July 16, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Just spell your name out for me, please.

Wieneke: My name is Robert Wieneke, W-i-e-n-e-k-e.

DePue: Say that for me one more time so I can hear it on this one.

Wieneke: Robert Wieneke, W-i-e-n-e-k-e.

DePue: Very nice. Okay, please clap your hands one time and we'll begin.

Wieneke: Okay, ready, Mark? (claps)

DePue: Today is Wednesday, July 16, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I am the Director of Oral History for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I am here today to do an interview with Bobby Wieneke. Did I say your last name right?

Wieneke: Wieneke.

DePue: Wieneke. I've been saying it wrong all this time. I apologize for that. This is part of our series with the Illinois State Museum Oral History of Illinois Agriculture, and it's an exciting series and this is going to be nothing less than a very interesting interview as we talk about your background and especially your family's background. Bobby, why don't you tell us a little bit about what we're looking at? I know you've got a little bit of the site of your house behind here, if you could explain a little bit about that.

Wieneke: Well, the house and the barn, the guy came across the ocean—our oldest ancestor that we know of, Frederick Wieneke, and he built the house and the barn around 1857, '58, and that's where the story begins.

DePue: So this house is 140, 150 years old?

Wieneke: Right. Yep. And the barn, he must have built the house and the barn about the same time.

DePue: Always like to include right at the front here when and where you were born.

Wieneke: Okay, I was born at the Jerseyville Hospital but I've been here all my life. I'm the fifth generation on this farm, and (laughter) it's been a good life out in the country.

DePue: And specific date, your date of birth?

Wieneke: 1961, September 14.

DePue: September 14. Okay, and I'm going to have your father hand off a couple pictures to you as well because we will get into those quick.

Wieneke: All right, this is a picture in 1893 of the house and the barn in just the way she sets today.

DePue: Now we've already scanned that picture in so people can get a look at it. But to me it's fascinating that it goes back that far.

Wieneke: Yeah, and if the house and the barn looks old then—well, it's probably ninety or ninety-five years old at this point.

DePue: Okay, amazing. And the other picture that we've got here. Might have to play with that a little bit to see if they can get the glare. If you can bring it forward a little—no, kind of tilt it down, there you go.

Wieneke: Tilt it. This is my great-great-great-grandpa Charles Wieneke and his wife.

DePue: And that's where it all started?

Wieneke: Yep, that's where it started.

DePue: Okay, tell me a little bit then about how the family came here in the first place.

Wieneke: Well, I guess they crossed the ocean on a boat. I found in some records it was the U.S. Germania, and evidently they settled right in this area with a lot of other people from different countries.

DePue: I saw on the records it said, "Hanover." Hanover, Germany.

Wieneke: Hanover, mm-hmm. That's as far as I can get to from here as far as research.

DePue: It was Frederick who came over?

Wieneke: Frederick, uh-huh.

DePue: And that's your great-great-grandfather.

Wieneke: Right.

DePue: Born in 1814, do you know when he came here?

Wieneke: Well, no. We looked and that's kind of where I'm at a standstill, is what year he actually came to this—but the farm, we go back on the history of the farm on the transactions on this section and we can go to about 1857 and that's when his name first starts showing up on this farm.

DePue: Okay. Any idea of why he came to the United States?

Wieneke: My guess is they probably had a flyer going around and said, "Free land," or "New land," and they wanted to start a new beginning, and over they came.

DePue: And any idea why they came to Calhoun County?

Wieneke: (laughter) No idea, no. Like I said, there's—on them old documents they came from Russia and Italy and Germany.

DePue: It seemed like a lot of the names that I saw were—they were all from Germany. Some of them said Prussia, some of them Baden, which is also another area of what's now modern day Germany.

Wieneke: Right. This family here it shows Hanover, but on looking at the old maps Hanover was a very big piece of land, so it's hard to tell what town exactly.

DePue: But most of them that came here are German?

Wieneke: A lot of Germans, right, mm-hmm, in this general area. The town is Brussels, so—Brussels, Germany, and Meppen and Hamburg. And they kind of named—the way the old story goes,

this looks like Germany where they came from and they named a lot of the towns after the towns over there.

DePue: Okay. What did your great-great-grandfather Frederick do when he first came here?

Wieneke: The old document says he was a lumberer in 1860, and I'm thinking that he was probably in the process of building the barn and he had just built this barn and he was probably working with wood and he says, "I'm a lumberer." So, (laughter).

DePue: And he apparently got married a little bit later in life as well?

Wieneke: Right, yeah. That's another kind of a puzzle. He was fairly old and he started a new family here, so.

DePue: When was your great-grandfather, Charles E. Wieneke, when was he born then?

Wieneke: Oh, I don't really know. That's him on that photo we showed of the farm. He was married and just started his family in 1893, so.

DePue: Well, the date I saw was 1866—apologize about putting you on the spot today, so. And that would mean that your great-great-grandfather was quite old when he started to have a family.

Wieneke: Right. We noticed that on those records.

DePue: So what did Charles do with the land?

Wieneke: He farmed it and he had livestock and put up hay in the barn here, and we've got several pictures of this old barn, putting hay in, and horses.

DePue: Okay, how much land did he have?

Wieneke: They had eighty.

DePue: Is that how much your great-great-grandfather purchased as well?

Wieneke: Frederick purchased 160 with a neighbor, and a few years later on these old documents it shows where they split off in eighty, and the neighbor, I guess he made some money and he could take care of it then.

DePue: Well, 160 acres, that would almost be in line with the old Homestead Act as well. Do you think that was the means that they got the land? You're not sure about that either.

Wieneke: No, I'm not sure. Whenever it's in the wintertime I research, I get some leads and somebody's got some photos and it's—during the summer we're so busy out here on the farm we ain't got time to research photos.

DePue: Bobby, I don't think you'll ever slow down too much.

Wieneke: No.

DePue: When did the family start doing orchards, then? Was that Charles who got into that?

Wieneke: That was Charles, uh-huh. He started the orchard business and then my grandfather followed with the orchard business, and my dad, he followed.

DePue: So would that have been in the late nineteenth century?

Wieneke: Right, it would have been the late nineteenth century.

DePue: What is it about this area of the country? I mean, we're in Calhoun County and it probably is worth mentioning that Calhoun County is somewhat isolated from the rest of Illinois because you've got the Illinois River on one side and the Mississippi on the other, and I took a ferry to get here, which you really don't do too often.

Wieneke: (laughter) That's right.

DePue: But what is it about this area that's conducive to orchards?

Wieneke: They say it's the land, it's fertile land and the way the rolling hills—there's a lot of good drainage, and the story I heard is that the rivers—there's a lot of good airflow, you need good airflow for orchards and things like that.

DePue: What's the reason for that?

Wieneke: It keeps bacteria moving and keeps your leaves dry and you don't get bacteria in your fruit.

DePue: Okay. I know that your great-grandfather died in 1942, your grandfather I think came along in 1910. His name was—

Wieneke: Robert Wieneke.

DePue: Robert W. Wieneke, okay. And did he make any changes in terms of what he was doing with the land?

Wieneke: No, he just—the same thing orchard, and he put out some more trees. And at that point they had tractors, were beginning. The horses were kind of out and they were starting with the tractors so he was able to cultivate more and take on more orchard.

DePue: So this would have been thirties, forties, fifties?

Wieneke: Exactly.

DePue: With apple orchards or peaches?

Wieneke: Apples, apples.

DePue: Was there a good market for the apples then?

Wieneke: The apples were. They would take them down to the river and the steamboats would pick them up. They would barrel them up and haul them down to the river and put them on the boat.

DePue: Where on the river did they take them?

Wieneke: Okay, Calhoun is only about two or three miles wide, but it's long and every mile or two there's a landing. There was different landings and the boats would stop. And they would also pick up lumber and stuff off these boats to build houses, and a lot of the floors. The floor in this house has, like, a stamp underneath of it, what landing it was shipped to. Yeah, my winery house up there, it has a stamp. It was like, Martin's Landing or our landing, or.

DePue: But even in the thirties and forties, 1930s and forties, they would be taking it down to these landings?

Wieneke: That was kind of going out then. This was later, when they were building these houses. Back in the 1800s this was mainly woods and they didn't have sawmills, and the boards were brought in.

DePue: Your father was born and raised here as well, then.

Wieneke: Yes, he was.

DePue: And your father's name.

Wieneke: Leroy.

DePue: And your mom's maiden name?

Wieneke: Rosemary Sievers.

DePue: Rosemary Sievers, okay.

Wieneke: She came from the Meppen area. We ran her family back to Germany too, and never really got any further than Germany. So I don't know what town they came from.

DePue: Do you have an idea roughly when her ancestors would have come?

Wieneke: I'd say about the same time, around the 1860s.

DePue: And so she's got roots in the Calhoun County area as well.

Wieneke: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. There's a lot of relation in the Sievers. That was a big family.

DePue: I know that you do peaches now, so can you talk about the transition from what your father had, the farm operation and the variety of things that he had, and then what you're now doing with it?

Wieneke: Okay. My grandfather, my dad, they had apples. And apples—there's not a big market for apples nowadays. So we went into the peach market, the fresh fruit.

DePue: Why did the apple market—

Wieneke: I guess because you could buy them in the store so easily. Any time of the year there are Washington apples, are sacked. You know, I was eating apples the other day, they were from Washington, and they had to be from last year. But peaches, we're into the fresh fruit, you know? You pick them and you got to sell them right away. So they only last a few days. Since this is so isolated and so beautiful, we've got a lot of people coming in from Missouri and different parts of the state just to ride around, and they buy peaches.

DePue: I know you're not the only operator around here who has orchards, but all of the orchards around here and all of the farmers who are operating in this area, they generally sell to a local market then?

Wieneke: Right. We can either sell them to the customers that are the road customers, or a lot of us put them in the back of trucks and take them somewhere to a town, farmers market's a big thing.

DePue: Your father was in the orchard business, but did he also have some other operations on the farm?

Wieneke: He had livestock. He raised hogs, and my grandfather raised cattle. So we decided something simple, peaches (laughter).

DePue: And I noticed on the drive up here there's certainly no shortage of corn and a few soybeans as well.

Wieneke: Right, mm-hmm.

DePue: Why did the family tend to move away from the corn and soybeans and the livestock and towards this?

Wieneke: Well, when I was younger it's either a combine will cost you 250,000, a tractor will cost you eighty-two hundred, and I didn't see sticking that kind of money into a farming operation. And so we have the little machinery and I thought, well, a little tractor and a peach orchard is what you need. So.

DePue: Was part of that because of the amount of acreage that you had to begin with?

Wieneke: Well, not really. It was the money thing. I mean, I'd rather buy small stuff and work with vegetables and fruit than have a 200,000 dollar combine sitting in the shed, so.

DePue: Is your operation, especially the orchard and the vineyard as we'll talk about later, typical for this region of Calhoun County in terms of the scale?

Wieneke: Yeah, there's a lot of small peach orchards, and then the guys like to put them on their truck and they go to a farmers market in Missouri, and some go to Champaign. We've got people coming down here from Peoria, and get peaches.

DePue: Well, tell me a little bit now, Bobby, if you could, about growing up on the farm. You had a brother, right?

Wieneke: I had a brother, right, right. It was pretty nice. We were kind of secluded back here so we didn't get out with the other kids and it was—you know, it was rough going to school because we were just quiet, out here on the farm being quiet.

DePue: But I'm sure your dad kept you busy, didn't he?

Wieneke: Oh, yeah, he kept us busy.

DePue: What kind of chores did you have?

Wieneke: Well, I can remember hoeing weeds out of bean fields. That was a hot job in the summertime. And picking apples—we picked apples when we were kids. And seemed like every night after school we'd have to take a load of apples somewhere. Get in the truck, and then we'd have to go over to Missouri with a load of apples and deliver them.

DePue: To a farmers market, or?

Wieneke: Well, we had a lady over there that was selling the apples along the busy highway, over on Highway 70 over by Wentzville. And she would come in and she'd want to buy the whole crop from my grandpa, but he wouldn't sell the whole crop because he had other customers. And in case something would happen to the lady or the deal you don't want to have nobody else, so. He wouldn't sell her the whole crop. We would just haul over there as she would call.

DePue: Your brother was younger?

Wieneke: Fourteen months younger, right.

DePue: And what was his name?

Wieneke: Terry.

DePue: Okay. Is he still around the area as well?

Wieneke: Oh, yeah. We both have a job at the same place in Granite City. We work for Kraft Foods at Capri Sun, making Kool-Aid.

DePue: The little packets?

Wieneke: The pouch with the straw, right, we make those. And I've been down there fifteen years this June, and he's probably been there twenty years.

DePue: You attended school in Brussels?

Wieneke: Brussels, right.

DePue: All the way through high school.

Wieneke: All the way through high school, right.

DePue: What was it like going—it had to be a pretty small school.

Wieneke: Yeah, my class when we graduated was thirty-three. So (laughter), you knew everybody.

DePue: Was it big enough to have a football team?

Wieneke: No, we had no football team. We had a basketball team and a baseball team, but no football team.

DePue: Did you get involved in sports then?

Wieneke: No, I wasn't, no. I went through the ag department. I was involved in agriculture. When we were growing up we really didn't get involved in a lot of sports and stuff.

DePue: You're what, the fifth generation that's tied to this particular piece of land, right?

Wieneke: Yes, I am. Right.

DePue: What was it that caused you to decide to follow in your father and your grandfather and great-grandfather's footsteps here?

Wieneke: I just like selling to the public and dealing with people, and the fresh fruit—you can see it growing and when you're done you see what you've accomplished.

DePue: When you were in high school what did you think you'd be doing?

Wieneke: I had no idea (laughter). I started out, I got a job when I was fifteen working for another farmer. He had big equipment and I wanted to drive big tractors and combines, and I went and I worked for two or three of the big farmers in the area for about ten or fifteen years.

DePue: What'd you do after high school, then?

Wieneke: I worked for the farmers. I worked for one farmer for four or five years and then we went to another farmer and we worked for him for a while, and then I kind of decided I wanted to have my own thing, my own peach orchard, and that's where I went from there.

DePue: Going to college then was never something that you considered?

Wieneke: No, no, I didn't consider that.

DePue: Well, I know, Bobby, that you did a little bit of modeling somewhere along the line.

Wieneke: (laughter) Yes, I did. I tried a lot of things along the line, and I tried that.

DePue: What drew you to modeling?

Wieneke: Some lady told me I would make a good model and I thought, Well, I'll try it. And sure enough, they accepted me and I went through modeling school.

DePue: Who's they?

Wieneke: John Casablanca, I went through that school, graduated.

DePue: Where was that?

Wieneke: It was in Fairview Heights, Illinois. And I did a little modeling at some of these malls, Jeanswest and different things.

DePue: Did you like that?

Wieneke: It was different. You'd leave the farm on a nice day like this and in about two hours you'd be all dressed up on a runway in St. Louis. It was quite a change in two hours (laughter).

DePue: I got to believe that most of the other people you were encountering in the modeling business that weren't tied to land didn't have the kind of background that you had at all.

Wieneke: No they lived in the town and they depended on the modeling to make them money.

DePue: That cultural difference, did you get some flack from some of these people sometimes?

Wieneke: Yes, I do. All the time. I've got people where I work, it's unbelievable. None of those people farm or have any fruit or anything. They know that when I go home I go home to work, and when I take a vacation I take it so I can pick peaches or plant grapes. They take a vacation so they can actually go on vacation. But I just do it to get some more work done (laughter).

DePue: There's never a shortage of work to do.

Wieneke: If you're trying to grow a business, you're going to have to take your vacation and use it to plant grapes or pick peaches or something like that.

DePue: How old were you when you were modeling?

Wieneke: I was probably in my twenties, early twenties.

DePue: And I know you tried your hand in some businesses in Brussels itself. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Wieneke: Right. Okay, out here on the farm when you got the peaches and you sell them to these markets, they take that peach—those peaches, say ten dollars a bushel, they'll turn around and turn them into twenty dollars a bushel and they'll double their money just as soon as you load them. Actually, there's been times when I've unloaded them off of my truck onto someone else's truck and the person at the store collected the money and he gave me half of what he collected. So I thought, why sell wholesale? Why don't I just buy a store and have my own business and then I'll get retail and I'll collect that extra money. We go through all the work of spraying the orchard, pruning, thinning, and the guy at the store, when you unload them, he makes the same amount of money and he didn't have to go through any work. So I thought, Well, I'll buy a store. And that's what I did.

DePue: And what did you purchase?

Wieneke: I purchased the Hauk's(??) store down the road a few miles.

DePue: What was that again?

Wieneke: It's called Hauk Mercantile, and I turned it into the Golden Eagle General Store and made my own logo, my own t-shirts, made an antique shop out of it, kind of a tourist attraction, and we did real good on the peaches. We sold a lot of peaches there and retailed them, made some good money.

DePue: Is this in Brussels?

Wieneke: Yes, it is.

DePue: But you're not doing that anymore?

Wieneke: No, after the peaches and the ferries close down you've got zero people coming around. Basically your business goes from full-blown to nothing for three or four months until things come back in the spring. So all this while you're paying electric, you're paying the taxes, insurance, and you're money you've got borrowed. You know, it's four months of nothing.

DePue: Well, one of the things I did want to ask you about and get more an understanding from you, Bobby, if you wanted to talk about this, is you know, you seem to be at this point where you've tried a couple of different things—the beginning of the entrepreneurial experiment, if you will.

Wieneke: (laughter) Exactly.

DePue: So can you tell us a little bit about the financial challenge, more about the financial challenges of the store?

Wieneke: The store, I kept borrowing some money and I got to the point where the payment per month was fairly high, and you know, I couldn't keep up with—the payments were too high. I spent too much money on restoring the store and that, so that's why I sold it. I had too much involved and I just sold it all. I set at home for a couple years twiddling my fingers and watching TV. That got to be a real highlight. You know, it'd be six o'clock in the evening and I'd stand straight up and I'd go, "I've got to find something else to do." So I thought, well, maybe real estate. So I started looking at houses and I drove out to the end of my road one day and there was a sign for sale on this old two-story, and I thought, Wow, I'm going to take a look at it. And unbelievable, it was built in 1863 and they just had big beams in the basement and a huge rock basement, and I thought, I can take this house—and what's a house worth that's restored, an old two-story? I bought it for thirty-four; I might be able to get it to eighty or so restored. I thought, What if I put a vineyard out and a wine cellar and called it a winery? I thought, Wow, now I could probably get a hundred and fifty for it. So that's what started me with the grapes.

DePue: You said that you were interested in real estate. Were you interested in purchasing or were you interested in getting a realtor's license?

Wieneke: No, I was going to buy houses, fix them up, and sell them on the side of my job in the city (laughter). I needed a sideline, something else to do.

DePue: And at the same time you're still running the peach orchard.

Wieneke: Right, okay, the peach orchard is still going and me and my dad got the peach orchard together and I thought in the wintertime I could fix a house up or something and resell it.

DePue: Talk about the transition from apples to peaches—when did it happen and the exact rationale for doing it?

Wieneke: That happened between—about the time I was working for some farmers. My dad asked me if we wanted to keep the apple orchard or take it out, and I said, "Go ahead and push them out." (laughter) And it took about ten years to realize that that wasn't the right thing to do.

DePue: When you say "push them out" I'm not sure—

Wieneke: With a bulldozer, completely take the orchard out and sell the equipment and do nothing, or farm—grain farm. So we had a lot of customers that were coming back and looking for produce and apples and me and my dad, we decided to try some peach trees.

DePue: Peaches you can get to mature trees, or trees that are bearing fruit quicker than apples?

Wieneke: Exactly. That's why we took peaches. An apple tree maybe takes seven or eight years, and you can have a crop of peaches second year. Not a full crop, but you can get peaches enough to sell.

DePue: What was telling you that there was a better market for peaches than apples?

Wieneke: There was a lot of tourists. When I was crossing the ferry, the line at the ferry was all Missouri plates, license plates, and everybody was wanting to come over here to buy fruit. You know, there's not that many places around the country where there's a line at the ferry to get into your county to buy fruit, so that's where we kind of started. Actually the second year we had our orchard we had one variety that produced enough peaches to pay for the trees.

DePue: It must have been difficult though, for a couple years, the transition from apples and basically what you said, you bulldozed down the apple trees, to the point where the peaches are starting to come out.

Wieneke: It took—well, I worked for the farmers during this period. I was probably sixteen or seventeen when they made the call on taking the trees out, and actually the day that the bulldozers were taking the trees out I was up at the neighbor's pruning his peach trees, working for him. I was still in school. I got to know the peach business and I got to know what varieties tasted the best and over the years of working for peach growers I knew how to set the orchard up as soon as we got started.

DePue: Is it your intention to keep on a pretty small scale as far as the peaches are concerned?

Wieneke: Right. Me and my dad got the peach orchard and we don't increase a whole lot. You get too big you'd have to hire a lot of people and now I'm into the wine, and it don't take a whole lot of peaches to make a lot of wine. And you can make wine real quick. And the peach orchard, you look under a tree and it'll be full of bad peaches—you know, they got a scar on or they're too soft, and they just hit the ground. And I'm thinking why not use these for wine? And I hate to see all this waste. So we decided to start making some peach wine; it's really good. I think the peach wine's going to go somewhere.

DePue: Well, we're going to see part of that operation later on in this interview. Were the customers kind of picking the kind of peaches that they wanted to purchase?

Wieneke: Yeah. We've got people that come here and they bring their family and we show them where the peaches are at and they go out there and pick two or three bushels. I had a few people, some winemakers, come over here and they would get ten bushels of peaches for wine and that's kind of where this kind of went (laughter).

DePue: When did you get into the grapes?

Wieneke: Well, like I said, I bought the house probably going on five years ago, and I just wanted to make it into a winery rather than just an old house, a restored house. I wanted to have the winery, so we kind of—I planted the grapes. And winemaking isn't that hard. Basically one recipe's kind of like the others. It's all the same.

DePue: When you're in the height of the peach season, how many people do you have working there?

Wieneke: Just me and my dad. We take turns. We'll come home from work or on our day off and we'll pick peaches.

DePue: So all the peaches are coming ripe at the same time?

Wieneke: No. We divided the orchard up into—we probably got seven varieties that each get ripe at a different time. So two guys can actually take care of six or seven hundred trees, because maybe this week we'll have fifty trees ripe and then in a week and a half we have another fifty, a different variety. And then if you stage it, you can have your whole season staged in one orchard. And the people like to keep coming back, you know. They'll come back in two weeks for more peaches and then you got another variety, and then they might say, "Well, we'll be back later on," and then there's another variety ripe.

DePue: Is most of your peach business then pick your own, or is it?

Wieneke: We have a lot of pick your own, and a lot of the truck guys come over here and they'll pick ten or twenty bushel and put them on their truck and then they'll take off and sell them along the road somewhere.

DePue: And do you pick some of your own and sell them in some local markets?

Wieneke: Right. We put up signs and people come out here to the farm and we sell. We sell to local markets and if I got time this year we might throw some in the van and go out to the city and sit on the corner and sell (laughter).

DePue: Can you give me an idea of how many acres you've got in peaches and how many trees that is?

Wieneke: The way I've got them planted, or the way we planted them, eighteen foot by twenty-four foot between the rows equals a hundred trees per acre. So we've got about seven acres of peaches.

DePue: And how much in grapes?

Wieneke: Right now the last acre I've just planted gives me four, four acres of grapes. And there's what, five varieties of grapes.

DePue: The grapes are a little bit more labor-intensive?

Wieneke: Yeah. I've already spent five thousand dollars on that acre just getting the grape plants and the post and the wire, trellis stuff.

DePue: What do you do with the grapes then?

Wieneke: Well, we'll make them into wine. That's the plan.

DePue: You will, but you haven't gotten there yet?

Wieneke: I will. I got a quarter acre that I've been making about fifty-five gallon a year. So there's 2.6 acres over the hill and I've got that new acres, and we'll have a lot of grapes next year.

DePue: It sounds like you haven't started to sell any wine commercially though.

Wieneke: No, I haven't did that yet. I've got about 400 gallon on hand, and I've got my license—two licenses, and I need a state license.

DePue: You have two licenses but you don't have a state license?

Wieneke: No. I've got the county liquor license which is very hard to get, and there was one in town and I'm right on the border line and they annexed me into the city limits so I could obtain that license. So I've been holding on that for two years now (laughter).

DePue: But you need to have a state license to sell.

Wieneke: I need a state license to sell.

DePue: How much does that cost?

Wieneke: That's probably another 500 dollars a year. The local license is 400 dollars a year, and then there's a license to sell and I've just been holding those two licenses until I open the winery, the old house.

DePue: Well, it's a considerable expense. You've got to get to a certain volume before you can start to turn a profit I would imagine.

Wieneke: Right. Another thing is the fifty-five gallon of wine that I'm making won't hardly open the doors. In fact, I'm wondering if this four acres will be enough. The peach wine is easy to make. You can make a hundred gallons in a matter of hours, so I'm looking forward this year to making about 500 gallon of peach wine.

DePue: And what are you going to do with 500 gallons if you don't have a license?

Wieneke: Stockpile (laughter). I've got a big basement and I'm just going to barrel it up, and actually the longer it sets the better it'll be.

DePue: Where is this going to be ten years from now, Bobby?

Wieneke: I have no idea (laughter). On something like this you just see where it takes you.

DePue: You don't have any particular long term plan or a vision, if you will?

Wieneke: Not really. I'm going to build a shed with a concrete floor and line up stainless steel tanks. Where I work at Granite City I know all about the stainless tanks and the piping and the pumps, and actually I'm a very good stainless steel welder. When they take a line down or something I bring a lot of the piping home, so I've got a good start on (laughter) my facility already.

DePue: I guess we didn't talk about your wife. We need to mention that.

Wieneke: Right. She works at Alton Mental Health. She's a technician down there and she's been down there for probably twenty years.

DePue: And what was her maiden name?

Wieneke: Cindy Patton, and she's from Hardin, up the road about twelve miles.

DePue: So also a Calhoun County girl.

Wieneke: Exactly, yep.

DePue: Patton with a t-o-n?

Wieneke: P-a-t-t-o-n, yes.

DePue: We're going to spend this afternoon then walking around and seeing some of the house and barn and seeing some other aspects of the farm and go over to the new places that you've been talking about quite a bit as well. So we'll kind of wait until the end where you get some more reflective questions.

Wieneke: Okay (laughter).

DePue: Anything else that you want to mention before we do that?

Wieneke: Not really, just you know, we've been here a long time and I don't ever plan on selling the farm. It's kind of nice to live on a place and not have to worry about it.

DePue: The roots run deep here in Calhoun County.

Wieneke: That's right, yep.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much here, Bobby.

Wieneke: Okay.

Interviewer 2: You wanted to record that?

Wieneke: (laughter) Well, what do you think?

Interviewer 2: I think we got it.

DePue: I think that sounds great.

(End of Wieneke_Bob_01.mp3; Start Wieneke_Bob_02_WLK.mp3)

DePue: Well, it's the afternoon. It's a gorgeous afternoon out here in Calhoun County, in the middle of July. So it's going to get a little bit warm. Again we're talking to Bobby Wieneke.

Wieneke: Wieneke, right. (laughter)

DePue: So I get that right. We start off by looking at the house, and the house dates from the 1850s, you said, Bobby?

Wieneke: I think as far as we can come up on the deed and stuff, around 1857.

DePue: And you told me that a couple of generations back, how many people were living in that house?

Wieneke: Well, my grandpa was part of fourteen in his family.

DePue: And the house wasn't as big at that time?

Wieneke: No, the back part they added on later, and it basically was this front, what you see with the roof. And they used every inch of it (laughter).

DePue: Fourteen—twelve kids and the parents?

Wieneke: No, fourteen kids.

DePue: Fourteen kids. And extended family living in there as well?

Wieneke: Yes, and they lived upstairs. They had a kitchen on the back and mainly they were—there were a lot of age differences. My grandpa, when he was a young boy, he had brothers that were already married and stuff that weren't living at home. So.

DePue: Well, let's take a look at the barn then. There's a lot of history there.

Wieneke: All right. The barn is about the same date. It was built in around 1857, and as you can see, the harness is still hanging from the generations back, just how they hung them.

DePue: Well, let's go ahead and take a closer-up view of that, okay? Okay, tell us a little bit about what we're looking at here, Bobby.

Wieneke: Well, this is the original barn, probably built in about 1857, 1858, along with the house. The harnesses still hang and the horseshoes are there. Basically when you hand a farm down over generations you don't have an auction, and everything stays with the farm. The new generation takes over and the old stuff still stays. So as you can see there, the pegs in the wood where they put the barn together—so this was a major project in 1857.

DePue: And these are some of the timbers you were talking about that was actually brought in, was not hoisted around here.

Wieneke: Well, the posts were made here and then the floorboards, they brought them in on a steamship.

DePue: Is that because they took a little bit more refining?

Wieneke: Finesse. Right, they had to have a nice sawmill to groove them to put them together.

DePue: What all would they be using this particular part for?

Wieneke: They would put hay up into the loft up on top. You can see they made a ladder. They split one small tree, they just split it down the middle. They put round pegs in the ladder. It's kind of dangerous looking, but it worked I guess.

DePue: Okay, why don't you show us the ladder there?

Wieneke: It's right up there.

DePue: Would they have the livestock in there?

Wieneke: Yes, they would keep their horses over there. They would bring them over here and put the harness on for their day's work.

DePue: Any cattle or pigs in here, Bob?

Wieneke: They had another barn, a couple hundred feet down below here that they had cattle in. This is mainly the horse barn where they would keep their workhorses.

DePue: Okay. I mean, that ladder does speak a lot of history.

Wieneke: (laughter) It sure does.

DePue: Why don't we get a long shot of the Lutheran church, and I know your property is right next to that as well there. I hate to ask you this, Bobby, but I'll ask you this anyway. These harnesses, these horseshoes, this rig that we're looking at here, it's been there for over a hundred years?

Wieneke: Yeah, exactly. Probably about 18- well, 1910 or so, or twenty. It was the end of the horses and then the tractor started.

DePue: So does that mean that somebody never got around to taking care of it and then after a while it seemed like it's too much tradition, and it's too much to do with the legacy of the farm?

Wieneke: That's right. Too much work involved in putting the harness on and taking care of the horse, and it was a lot easier just to put gas in a tractor and start it, and you could get a lot more work done.

DePue: And never got around to putting it away.

Wieneke: (laughter) That's where it is, just hanging right there. It's where they took it off, hundred years ago probably.

DePue: What I'd like to do now, I know we're going to see the peach orchard from a longer distance, but if we can walk down to the cluster of peach trees you've got right down here, and then before we do that look in the background and see the Lutheran church.

Wieneke: That's my house out there, the old house where I'm building the winery.

DePue: The house is just to the right of the Lutheran church.

Wieneke: Right, the brick house. We'll go out there after a while. It was built in 1863. Okay, to the right of the Lutheran church is the two-story brick that I bought four years ago. It was built in 1863, and that's where I'm going to make the winery at.

DePue: Now do you know when the church itself would have been built?

Wieneke: It was built probably a little bit—a few years after the house. That would be maybe sixty-five or so, the farmers got together and they built a church. One donated the land and the bricks, they were made out of clay out of the field behind it.

DePue: The bricks are made from local material.

Wieneke: Right. My house was made—one of the relatives showed me a hole dipped in the field where the clay was pulled out for the house in 1863.

DePue: Around here I would guess that most people are either Lutheran or Catholic?

Wieneke: Yes, Lutheran or Catholic, mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay. Now let's take a look at the peaches we've got here. You can walk over to the peaches. Because those look to be pretty ripe, but I thought you'd said they weren't ripe yet.

Wieneke: It's going to be maybe another week on it, yeah.

DePue: Ready to go here? Now tell us a little bit about what we're looking at here, Bobby.

Wieneke: Okay, you're looking at my earliest peach in this orchard. It's an Early Glow. And as you can see, we've got eight rows and every row is a different variety. This is kind of a miniature of our big orchard. Every row is a different variety, every week and a half to two weeks another row will get ripe, on through the season. So we've got basically probably two and a half months of peaches in this one little orchard to get ripe.

DePue: Okay, here's the test for you Bobby. The first variety in front was what name?

Wieneke: Early Glow.

DePue: And then next?

Wieneke: New Haven. Then the third one is Glo Haven.

DePue: Okay, and let's walk down through here.

Wieneke: As you can see, they're greener and smaller.

DePue: So they're going to put on a little bit more size.

Wieneke: Yeah, it's going to be like a said, a week and a half on each row. And this'll be a Loring. And there is no color in these yet, so you can see that they're a long ways off. And that'll be Crest Haven, and then I got Early Alberta and couple more varieties on the end, don't really know what they are. I got to go look in my book. So every week and a half there will be another row getting ripe.

DePue: Are these mature trees, pretty much?

Wieneke: These trees are probably about six years old.

DePue: And will they be getting much larger?

Wieneke: Oh, yeah. They'll grow another ten foot, and a lot bigger around.

DePue: So once they get to be mature trees then the challenge is for picking them, to become much more—

Wieneke: Right. It's easy to prune the smaller trees and it's easy to pick them, so that when they get older then they get taller and you got a lot more pruning and things like that.

DePue: But your production's going to go up at the same time.

Wieneke: Right, exactly, exactly. The idea behind this is those trees over there, they were planted in ninety-three. So a peach tree is only good for twelve, fifteen years, and we've overextended on that orchard so the idea is to start another orchard and get them up and then take the other one out and just kind of make a rotation.

DePue: It surprises me you've got as much distance between each one of these rows here.

Wieneke: Oh, you'd be surprised what happens when they get bigger. You're lucky to get a tractor through here. We have to keep pruning the sides off so they don't hit the tractor.

DePue: So once they get to be full grown you're not going to be able to walk down this—

Wieneke: No, this will be done this way. Yeah, you can drive through here now but in a couple years it'll be over with.

DePue: What kind of maintenance do you need to do then?

Wieneke: I spray under the trees with the four-wheeler, and my dad, he shreds the orchard with his tractor and shredder.

DePue: Shreds it?

Wieneke: Yeah, mows it with the big mower. And he sprays it with the tractor and sprayer. So he's been spraying all summer over here.

DePue: You're spraying, obviously, insecticide?

Wieneke: Insecticide and fungicide and it's okay. This spring we had a lot of wet weather and we had to spray about once every week or ten days.

DePue: More of the fungicide?

Wieneke: More fungicide, right. Now we're less rain and we got to concentrate on keeping the bugs out, the worms.

DePue: Does that cause problems for residue on the peaches, then?

Wieneke: No, it don't do too bad. You have to wash your fruit anyway, and we try not to use too many chemicals.

DePue: So nothing that the consumer needs to be concerned with.

Wieneke: No, I wouldn't be concerned about it.

DePue: What kind of insecticide are you using then?

Wieneke: Pyrethrin, the new style. It's made from flowers, so it's fairly good. It works good on the codling moth.

DePue: The codling moth, is that the main enemy?

Wieneke: (laughter) That's our enemy, exactly.

DePue: Now what does one of those things look like?

Wieneke: It's a little moth and he lays on the peach and about every twenty days they fly and they land on the peach and lay an egg, and then that egg becomes a worm in three days, and that worm will go into the seed. And then when you break the peach open you see a worm inside.

DePue: It goes all the way to the pit?

Wieneke: All the way to the pit, right.

DePue: Now when you say it flies every twenty days I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

Wieneke: Well, every twenty days they mate, and then they fly, and then they mate, and then they lay eggs. So there's a pattern to it and if you put out some traps you can catch the moths, and when you catch a lot of moths you know when to spray.

DePue: So you wait until they're active and then you nail them.

Wieneke: Then you nail them, exactly.

DePue: Okay, anything else we need to know while we're down here?

Wieneke: Peaches are self-pollinating so you don't have to worry about the bees, and that's one good thing with the peaches. Apples are different—bees have to pollinate.

DePue: You need a little bit of a breeze to pollinate.

Wieneke: Right. But I've seen a lot of bees in the clover, the white clover here in the orchards, back where the grapes are at. The bees are just buzzing, so. There's a lot of bees around that I can see.

DePue: When you're harvesting—this probably falls in the category of a stupid question, but are you using the old fashioned bushel baskets to do that?

Wieneke: No, we pick in the peck box with a handle and basically that's easy for the consumer to pick up and put in his car.

DePue: So a little bit smaller volume.

Wieneke: Right, right. And the peaches are bigger. We like to pick them closer to being ripe. We don't have no refrigeration, and not only that, they don't taste very good when they come out of the refrigeration. So we try to get them as close as we can to edible, juicy peaches, so.

DePue: And once you pick them they're going to have a couple more days.

Wieneke: They'll have a couple days, right. And the consumer buys them and they're tree-ripened.

DePue: The ones that we saw right at the beginning here look like they're already ripe.

Wieneke: They're close. I think a couple more days and we'll be picking some of those.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's go ahead and kind of break this off and then we want to get a shot of your larger orchard, and that's more of a panoramic shot.

Wieneke: Right, it is. It's up on the hill.

DePue: Okay, let's go there then. (pause in recording) We're now out here looking at an overlook of Bobby's main orchard and vine area. Bobby, if you could tell us exactly what we're looking at here.

Wieneke: Okay, this is 2.6 acres of grapes that I just planted last year, and that's the peach orchard, planted in ninety-three. There's five varieties of peaches over there, and you can see the new orchard we just planted this spring. There's a hundred trees in that.

DePue: Okay, so what I wasn't paying attention to at all is two or three years down the road it's already going to be producing.

Wieneke: Right. In a couple years those'll have peaches and we might start taking some of these out. If the grapes and the wine catch on there might be vines over there in a couple years, but we'll have to wait and see (laughter).

DePue: Does that mean you are considering scaling back on the peaches and then increasing the vines?

Wieneke: Right. Right now I'm kind of fifty-fifty. Got four acres of grapes and about six, seven acres of peaches and right now we're kind of waiting to see what happens.

DePue: And if you wanted to establish normal rotation you'd probably want to be planting about an acre's worth of peaches a year?

Wieneke: Yeah, we would plant some more peaches if we were going to replace this orchard in a couple years, so.

DePue: You put the pond in yourself, then?

Wieneke: Yes, my dad, he was working for a bulldozer company, an excavating company, and he decided to put the pond in. He's wanted a pond all his life, a big lake, and I said, "Well, let's go ahead and do it." Back in the old days, in the 1800s this was a pasture. It was too steep to farm. And the first time around it was probably a pasture, and my grandfather had apple trees on it. So we planted some peach trees on it back in ninety-three and we took those out last year. There were too many peaches for us to handle, me and my dad.

DePue: Well, you realize there are people in the big cities that would pay a fortune for the view you've got here.

Wieneke: That's right. It's pretty nice to be up here working on the grapes and have such a nice view. The church bells ring and it's really wonderful.

DePue: This might seem like a peculiar question, but does the family have a cemetery plot on the property?

Wieneke: No, not on this property.

DePue: What else would you need to tell us from here?

Wieneke: Well, that's about it. I've got three varieties of grapes here. Let me see, I got Chambourcin, these are Traminette, and way down there is the Riesling—it's kind of an experimental thing for me. They're kind of iffy as far as the zone, protection zone, and if it gets down to twenty below zero here I might not have any grapes left on that lower patch.

DePue: The Rieslings.

Wieneke: Riesling, right. These.

DePue: Which is the one that's most familiar to most of us.

Wieneke: Right. This area is kind of iffy.

DePue: Are the same varieties over in your other location?

Wieneke: No, I got two varieties over there that are different than these. I got Vidal and Lemberger that I'm trying there. It's a red grape. Same deal on that, this is not really for this zone.

DePue: The varieties you have closer to you here though, is that a less common or less desirable variety?

Wieneke: It's regularly grown around here, it's Traminette, and the Chambourcin is another one. It's below the hill. It's a red grape. It's kind of common. So I want to get more of a higher class wine, so I'm trying a couple new grapes and we'll see what happens.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much, Bobby, and I think we're heading over to the house now. (pause in interview) We're in front of a antique John Deere tractor. We had just been talking about the harnesses, the horse harness and the buggy rig, everything that we saw over in the barn that you had. Bobby, tell us a little bit about this tractor.

Wieneke: Okay. This is the next thing after the harness. After they were done with the horses in the early thirties, middle thirties, all the farmers would go out and get them a tractor and then they would hang the harness up for good. And as you can see, it was iron wheels and you had to start it with the flywheel.

DePue: You actually have to hold onto that flywheel and turn it?

Wieneke: You have to turn it to start it, like this. And it'll start right up. But I don't know how, my dad starts them (laughter). And he's restoring tractors. That's his hobby.

DePue: A labor of love, I would imagine.

Wieneke: Yeah. We bought this over the winter and he pulled the front off and took the pistons out and cleaned them up and we're just about ready for some paint.

DePue: What does this date from?

Wieneke: This is 1938. Is that right, Dad? Thirty-nine, he says. So it's really old.

DePue: So tractors had been around on the farm for a while, but it took—you know, it obviously didn't come in and everybody converted over night. There were still a sizable percentage, as I recall, of farms that were operating with horse teams even in the 1930s.

Wieneke: Exactly. Yeah, a lot of the farmers didn't have money to go out for a new tractor so they would buy—you know, it took in the thirties and forties, they would get a tractor and start out with one and they'd still use their horses. A lot of them would harrow and mow with the horses while the hard work was done with the tractor, the ploughing and disking.

DePue: Well, this won't surprise you, Bobby, but historians consider that tractor and automation on the farm is the most important technological advancement in agriculture in the last century and a half.

Wieneke: Right. Everything was new back then, the tractors, the trucks, the electricity. You know, it was in probably forty-five or so before the electricity came about out here in the country. It was something to see. Everything was changing.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much. (pause in recording) We are now looking at the home that Bobby purchased not too long ago. Bobby, tell me what it is that you saw about this house that drew you to it.

Wieneke: Well, about four or five years ago I was driving by and I'd seen a "For Sale" sign. I was going to try selling real estate, buying and selling houses. And I thought, I'll take a look at this old place, and I went down in the basement and I came out of the basement with the big beams and I thought, Boy, I got to have this place. So I went ahead and bought it. I paid thirty-four thousand dollars for it. And then I decided what's an old two-story really worth? Maybe eighty? So maybe I'll add a winery and a vineyard and really make it worth 100,000 or more, you know. So that's what got me involved in the grapes.

DePue: Well, I hope you don't mind me mentioning, there's plenty of work to do in this house.

Wieneke: (laughter) Oh, yeah. Yeah, everybody says start on the house first, but it takes several years for grapes to go so I thought, I'll go out, I'll plant the grapes, in a couple years, and then I'll come back and start on the house.

DePue: It looks like there's been a little bit of settlement too.

Wieneke: Yeah, there has. Yeah, it's going to be a project but I had to take the whole yard down about ten inches. It was up on the second board on the back, back there, the dirt was, from over a hundred years of leaves and compost from huge trees in the yard, and neglect. There were trees growing out of the foundation, about two inch around trees, and took all this down and leveled it, leveled the vineyard. And I wanted it all on a slope, and I sloped it all and planted my grapes, my first grapes.

DePue: Okay, the ones that are directly behind your back is what variety?

Wieneke: This is a Vanessa. It's an edible grape, and they're turning right now. It's seedless. And the idea behind this is I got grapes planted on the fence. The idea is when the winery takes off I'm going to have chairs under these trees. You can see the trees are spaced out for outside dining.

DePue: Outstanding.

Wieneke: I thought I'd plant trees, and the grass and the grapes, and work on the house in a couple years.

DePue: Now the ones that we're looking at here, the main row, the first thing that jumps out at you is all the damage.

Wieneke: Yeah. The Japanese beetle was in here just terrible; this was all black with beetles just the other day. And I used a chemical on here with my sprayer, I came out here with seven and I don't know—I don't think it killed them, but they don't like it so they took off (laughter). And that's all that counts.

DePue: That may be what we're looking, flying around right in front of you?

Wieneke: That's a small one. He looks like he's maybe a new hatch. They're black with greenish wings. But the other day there was hundreds of them.

DePue: And they obviously are voracious eaters.

Wieneke: Yes, they are eating a lot of crops for people. And the cherry trees—they ate all the leaves up on that, and the grapes, and I have them over on the other farm. They're in the grapes over there, so.

DePue: What variety are we looking at here, Bobby?

Wieneke: This is a Vidal. It's a white grape. It's kind of a common white grape.

DePue: Now when you say a white grape, the skin is white?

Wieneke: Yes, it's white with two seeds. It makes a white wine, a sweet, semi-sweet white wine.

DePue: I'm ignorant enough about winemaking—do you leave the skins in the process or do those get removed?

Wieneke: Not on these. These get removed. You squeeze the juice out and it's pure white, and just ferment the juice.

DePue: And tell me what you have to do to maintain these.

Wieneke: These ain't too hard to take care of. We just prune them in the spring, prune them all down, and when the leaves come out this whole—the stems are all full of branches, so you have to knock them off and keep them brushed off. It'll do it about two or three times in the spring and early summer, and you keep those off otherwise they'll vine over your whole floor.

DePue: How difficult is it to train these to work on the trellises?

Wieneke: Oh, not too difficult. The second year you get them up on the wire and you take black tape and tie them up.

DePue: Now there's three lines that you've got in here but I notice that you really only trellised the top.

Wieneke: Right. The other ones, this one is to start them. I put one down low and I start him on that, and get him tied to that. And then, oh, they're just kind of used for balance but the top one is where all the limbs are at. The weight's on the top one.

DePue: Now you were mentioning that you stripped all of these twigs off. Does that mean that this thing would really spread out if you were to let it?

Wieneke: It would be a mess. It'd look like a pineapple, I guess you would call it. Kind of like a pepper plant—they grow limbs all across. Here's one right here. If I let that one grow, it would be way

out here. So the best thing to do is you knock them off early, keep them off. And that way you don't have to prune that much the next year.

DePue: What are some of the other challenges you've got in maintaining these?

Wieneke: The bugs, and the fungicides—you have to spray every couple weeks with a fungicide to keep the rot out. There will be a rot get in the cluster.

DePue: A wet year like we've had this year, does that make a difference on the line?

Wieneke: No, it's turning hot and dry right now so the grapes, the clusters are just starting to get tight and I think we'll be okay.

DePue: And the same question is for the peaches here, and pollination.

Wieneke: The same—these are okay; they self-pollinate.

DePue: Let's go ahead and see some of your newer planting areas and talk about that a little bit.

Wieneke: All right. (pause in recording)

DePue: We are now at a newer planting area for Bobby Wieneke's vineyard. Bobby, if you can tell us, what's your intention here in this area?

Wieneke: Okay, I just purchased this over the winter and this is a Lemberger grape. It's a vinifera. It's a German grape, a red grape. And this is probably more of a special grape, going to make some more special wine, more high-class wine, I would say. And we planted this this spring. There's probably—I think there's 450 plants here, and last week and the week before we put in the post, and I strung the wire last week and put in the turnbuckle.

DePue: The turnbuckle. That's how you tighten up the wire?

Wieneke: That's how you tighten the wire. And each post had to get a hole drilled through it. I run my wire through the post. A lot of people staple on the side, but I run it through to keep the plants in the middle, the post in the middle, and I want the wire in the middle. So that way everything's all in line.

DePue: And you're tying these up with just common engineering tape?

Wieneke: Yeah, this is marking tape. You get it at like, Lowe's or Home Depot, and you just wrap it around and start bringing the grape up. And again with these, we have to take and cut all these new limbs off. These were all bushed out the other day and we had to trim them off. Here's some of the stuff that we trimmed off of this. The main thing is you get a center, a center leader—a straight one, the straightest one—and you want to go up as quick as you can and get it on this wire. As soon as you get it on the wire, then you start wrapping it, and once you get it on the wire and wrapped it kind of takes care of itself as far as training.

DePue: Now this time next year are you going to put another wire on the top of this?

Wieneke: No, this grape grows on this wire about forty inches.

DePue: So it's not going to be as tall as the other ones?

Wieneke: No, and I'll have to put some wires down the side as a catch-wire, and those are a different style. There's two styles basically that I have.

DePue: One of the questions I want to ask you was what do you start with when you plant, and where do you get those?

Wieneke: These came from New York, a nursery in New York.

DePue: And it was a twig?

Wieneke: It was a plant with roots about this long.

DePue: The roots were that long.

Wieneke: And I had to take my tractor with a ripper shank and I ripped the rows and we took a tile spade and moved it around and stuck them in the slot. And that way we had our rows straight and had it deep enough too.

DePue: A matter of pride for people with vineyards to have straight rows, I would imagine.

Wieneke: That's right. These rows are straight. We used string and there's a guy that works for me, he has a knack for straight rows. I don't know how he did it, but he's got them straight.

DePue: Anything in particular in terms of keeping the weeds down? I notice you got a few here.

Wieneke: I cultivated it with my little tractor, threw some dirt over on it, and I'm getting ready to—now that I got the limbs off I can spray without damaging the plant. So that's the key, is get the plant up off the ground so you can put on chemical.

DePue: And it's not going to affect the fruit at all?

Wieneke: No, I just use a burn-down Gramoxone and spray under the plant, just like I do over there under those.

DePue: Are you going to be harvesting anything at all from these you just planted this year?

Wieneke: Not this year, no. It'll be next year. Hopefully they'll have some grapes on and we can try and make some wine.

DePue: And when would they reach the peak of production?

Wieneke: In about three years they'll be at their peak.

DePue: Now the peaches have, you said I think about twelve years on an average peach tree?

Wieneke: Oh, yeah. The trees don't last too much over twelve years, fifteen.

DePue: How about these vines?

Wieneke: These vines will probably last forever. No telling. Some of the vines in Germany are seventy-five years old.

DePue: Again, is there anything unique or better about this soil than we would find across the river in some of that deep, rich, Illinois loam that we see?

Wieneke: No, it's a clay and loam mix, and it's good for drainage. A lot of the fruit trees like clay soil.

DePue: Drainage is important for them?

Wieneke: Right, right. We have pretty good luck around here with the peaches and fruit trees.

DePue: How about if you have a drought here, is that a problem?

Wieneke: Well, I had drip irrigation on those and last year I didn't need it. I took it out. So, it would be a problem. But if you run that ripper shank at two foot, that water all soaks down in there and those ones at the farm—there was 1,700 plants over there and I lost three. And last year was hot and dry, one of the worst ones around here.

DePue: What would you say your worst enemy is for the grapes?

Wieneke: Probably the bugs. Yeah. You got to keep after those bugs. The Japanese beetle has really gotten bad over here the last few years.

DePue: How about for the peach trees?

Wieneke: Those will be the codling moth, the worms in the peach. And nobody wants a worm with a peach when you break it open, so.

DePue: How much land did you just purchase here?

Wieneke: I just bought one acre, one acre square. And my property line is over here so I was able to put in a circle drive and fence it, so it's really turned out to be a good thing for my winery here.

DePue: This circle drive is brand new, isn't it?

Wieneke: Yes, it is. I just put it in a couple weeks ago and poured the gravel on it. And now I got a way out (laughter), a way to get my grapes out.

DePue: So between the grapes, the peaches, fixing up the house, putting in the fans, the circle drive, everything else, do you have any spare time, Bobby?

Wieneke: No, I don't, no. I work in the city two days and I'm off two days so I got two days to get as much done as I can. A lot of times I'll pick up my material on my way back from work, gasoline for the weed eaters, lawnmowers, diesel fuel for my tractor, nails. I went to Jerseyville one night after work and got the wire for the trellises, and then the day I'm off I'm ready with all my material.

DePue: When you say you work two days at the factory and two days here, falls on different days of the week often times, sounds like.

Wieneke: Right. I'm on a twelve-hour rotation, so I got every other weekend off. So that's how it works. You work one weekend and the next weekend's off.

DePue: And the factory job is just to keep you going here.

Wieneke: (laughter) I'm hoping. But I started out at the factory fifteen years ago to get some money so I could build my farming operation. And at that time, later I purchased the store and tried my hand at store ownership and that didn't really work out, so I sold that and set at home and watched TV after working for two years and that definitely wasn't working out. So then I thought, maybe I'll try the real estate business, and that's when I purchased the old house, and decided to make a winery out of it.

DePue: Would it be fair to say, Bobby, that five or ten years down the road if this grew to the point where you no longer needed to have a job in the city that you'd give the city job up?

Wieneke: (laughter) Oh, definitely. Most everybody down there would like to give up the city job and retire to the country. But I'm hoping I can retire before I get too old. And hopefully—I've been thinking maybe another year or two, if we get this wine going. This peach wine I think is going

to catch on. I got all those peach trees over there and this wine is just great. It's sweet and peach-flavored, and soon as I get the house done I'm thinking we get this winery going and we'll be in business.

DePue: And from what you mentioned before, you see the grape wine business growing even more in relationship to the peach?

Wieneke: Exactly, yes. I planted two more acres and I got four acres now, and I'm thinking now it's time—I got my grapes planted and the peach trees are already growing, so now it's time—I'm going to build a shed in back for processing, and start lining my tanks up and start with the wine business.

DePue: These vines that are right behind us, when would we be picking those grapes?

Wieneke: Those'll be in September; around the first part of September we'll be out here harvesting those, and then I'll make those into wine just as soon as they pick them.

DePue: Just the vines that we're seeing back here, what kind of production would you say?

Wieneke: Last year I got fifty-five gallon off of these six rows, which is basically an overgrown yard, one quarter acre.

DePue: Fifty-five gallons of wine?

Wieneke: Wine, right.

DePue: Okay, so that's basically fifty-five gallons of grape juices you start with?

Wieneke: Yeah, actually I started with sixty gallons of grape juice and then you have to let it settle and then you pump it to another tank after about a month, and then in about a week you've got alcohol, after you've put in the yeast.

DePue: Well, maybe we shouldn't get into that too much until we go on the inside of the house.

Wieneke: Okay, let's have a look.

DePue: Let's do that. (pause in recording) Well, Bobby, we're now inside the house. This is actually the back side of the house and from what you mentioned earlier, this part of the house wasn't built, obviously, with the main frame.

Wieneke: No, this was another house they attached to the back of the old house. So the original wall and the door is still here, but this is what they would call a summer kitchen. And this is where the old families would process their meat and things like that in the summertime, and green beans and can their stuff in their garden.

DePue: Well, it's still used for processing food.

Wieneke: (laughter) Now we're processing wine. I got peach in those two and there's some peach over there, and grape, and this is grape—last year's grape. There's apple wine. This is grape wine over here, and I've started—

DePue: Over here in the white containers?

Wieneke: The white containers, right, uh-huh. And that is some of the wine I bottled up, and there's the squeezer. That's what I put my grapes in here, after I pick them, and then they're ran through a crusher/de-stemmer, and then that goes in there and then this gets turned down.

DePue: A crusher/de-stemmer—what do you mean by that?

Wieneke: It's like, you dump them in and it takes the stems and pulls them down through it and the stems go out the front and the grapes fall out the bottom. And then after that you've got ground up grapes and then you dump them in here and squeeze the wine out.

DePue: On your timeline, when do you think you'd be selling grape wine?

Wieneke: I've got my license, the county license, and I need the state license. And as soon as I get the house up and running I'll start selling.

DePue: So you think that's two or three years away?

Wieneke: I'd say a couple years. In the meantime I'll stockpile my wine in the basement and barrel it up.

DePue: How about the peach wine?

Wieneke: The peach wine I'll do the same, I'll barrel it up.

DePue: Roughly the same timeline for that?

Wieneke: Yeah, about a couple years.

DePue: Is there a difference in the initial processing for the peach wine?

Wieneke: Actually all wine is about the same. Peach wine, believe it or not, as sweet as those peaches are, you have to add sugar to those to get them to ferment.

DePue: And you don't for grapes?

Wieneke: Grapes, on this—this is called a hydrometer, and you measure your juice and this'll float, and this is how you measure your sugar contact. And a grape actually is sweet enough to ferment. It's 1.080 and that's about what you need because you take sugar and you got to convert that to alcohol, so you have to start at a certain level sugar to get a certain level of alcohol.

DePue: It is surprising given the sweetness.

Wieneke: You wouldn't think it. Yeah, the peaches were 1.030. I had to add a lot of sugar to those big, juicy peaches.

DePue: What's the bottling process look like, then?

Wieneke: Basically this tank has a floating lid and I'll pump into this—

DePue: That's where the fermenting goes on?

Wieneke: Well, I ferment in these right now but I will ferment in this, this year. I just bought this. So we'll ferment in that and then we can bottle out of this.

DePue: Five hundred liters?

Wieneke: Five hundred liters. It's my first stainless tank. I've got piping and stuff at home in the garage so I'm ready to start laying it out.

DePue: When you get to the licensing and actually production process, then I assume you'll also be subject to occasional inspections?

Wieneke: Yes, uh-huh.

DePue: And what kind of things would they look for then?

Wieneke: Cleanliness of your operation.

DePue: Is that state inspectors that come in?

Wieneke: Yes.

DePue: And I'm looking at what I think is the machine that you use for putting in the corks.

Wieneke: No, that takes the corks out. This is the corker over here. The bottle goes under here and it puts the cork in. Basically it fits there and the cork goes in here and then you just, phew—and that's how you do it. I usually work on this in the fall or the wintertime. The summer's so busy with keeping the fruit trees trimmed, and spring trying to plant new plantings, that this all hasn't been touched since last fall.

DePue: Is this the opportunity—I see some cups over there—to have a sample?

Wieneke: (laughter) We can sample it if you want. I got some cups over here that are open. What would you like, some peach wine?

DePue: I like the idea of peach wine.

Wieneke: Glo Haven, here we go. We just looked at these in the orchard. And they're a long ways from wine, but you can give this a try if you want.

DePue: Okay. I like the peach wine.

Wieneke: That's one thing about being the owner of the orchard and having your own fruit, you want to taste it. You don't want to have a dry wine that has no flavor. I want a peach flavor. Did you notice that peach aroma that came out of there?

DePue: Jumps right out.

Wieneke: It does, exactly. If I don't taste my own peaches I don't want to drink it.

DePue: Well, I would definitely think there's a market for that somewhere.

Wieneke: Oh, there is. There's going to be a good market for the peach wine. Hopefully it'll catch on, and I think that'll probably be a big seller.

DePue: Well, I think next thing is for us to move on to the storage and that would mean we move on to your basement.

Wieneke: Let's go down to the basement. That's my favorite part; that's what made me buy this house. When I'd seen that stone foundation and the big floor joists, I said, "Boy, this place is built nice." (laughter)

DePue: Okay, let's go there.

Wieneke: Okay, let's go. (pause in recording)

DePue: Well, it's obvious we've made our way down in the cellar. Bob, tell us a little bit about—again if you reiterate what you had just been talking about it, what it was about this home that really struck you.

Wieneke: Once I walked down here and I looked at the structure of the house with the big beams and the big floor joists, I knew it was built pretty strong. And this is the main beam that holds the four rooms upstairs. This runs all the way out underneath that porch that you guys had seen first.

And once I'd seen how well it was built, I knew—it looks outside like it's going to fall in, but it's not that bad. It can be fixed.

DePue: These posts here, at least this one post, looks like that's something you've put in yourself.

Wieneke: Yeah, I put this rack in and put these racks in for the barrels. Pretty soon I'm going to take the wine from upstairs and start lining my barrels up, because the end of that house we just looked at, I'm going to tear it off.

DePue: So the wine that goes in the barrels is strictly from grapes.

Wieneke: Yes, uh-huh. So far. But I got the peach wine up there, and we're going to bring all the wine down here.

DePue: Is some of the peach wine going to go in barrels as well?

Wieneke: Yes, it will.

DePue: It looks like most of it so far is going into bottles.

Wieneke: That is a hard cider I made. That was my first try a few years ago at winemaking. I made some hard cider and it turned out really good.

DePue: Peach cider or apple cider?

Wieneke: Apple cider. And this is a couple bottles of grape wine. My grandma had some grapes over at her house. She had Concord. And believe it or not, that made some really good wine.

DePue: Little bit on the sweeter side?

Wieneke: Yes. We've all probably drank that Magen David when we were younger.

DePue: Oh, yeah.

Wieneke: That's exactly what flavor that's got.

DePue: It's Communion wine flavor.

Wieneke: Exactly. And it's got a good kick to it.

DePue: Where've you been getting the barrels?

Wieneke: These came from Jack Daniels distillery. These are used barrels. Jack Daniels distillery uses them once and then they have them in different stores to purchase.

DePue: I would imagine it's important—I know that part of the curing of the barrel is the char the inside of the barrel. Do they give the wine a little bit different flavor having been used for whiskey as well?

Wieneke: It sure does. Yeah, I started with some of these barrels but I've located a place in Cuba, Missouri, that makes brand new ones and I've got an order already started.

DePue: Okay, so you would prefer new ones?

Wieneke: New ones. We're going to get new barrels and we're going to pump that wine you've just seen down here, and then there's going to be an alleyway made through here, up into my new shed. And we're going to have a shed out in the parking lot. That's where I'm going to process. I got to go through about six foot of dirt and hook into my shed, and we're going to be able to roll the barrels back and forth here (laughter).

DePue: And to reiterate, the labor force for all of these projects that you're talking about is who again?

Wieneke: Me. I took out about eight inches of dirt, or ten inches from this whole basement. There was a wall right here but it wasn't holding anything up. It was on this side of the joist. So I took that out, took out eight inches of dirt and hauled it off, and I'm getting ready to stone the floor. I'm going to bring in some gravel and start laying stone like I did my sidewalk out front.

DePue: And this is just the winemaking side of the operation. You've also got some major work obviously in store for you with the house itself.

Wieneke: Right. This year we spent probably three weeks working on a new set of stair steps, and basically that's all we could spare. And then it was time to start pruning the orchard and spraying, and it just leads into—one thing leads into another.

DePue: So the house has to wait until late fall.

Wieneke: We'll try it again this year. We'll try it in December again this year.

DePue: What's the long term prospects for the house like?

Wieneke: Basically I'm going to make a bed and breakfast. It's going to be two rooms upstairs. We put in a new set of steps up in the center of the house and we're going to divide it into two rooms, a room on the left and a room on the right, and go from there. We're going to rewire, divide the electricity up. So it's going to be a business here pretty soon. Give it a year or two.

DePue: Where would you actually have the retail part of the operation?

Wieneke: It'll be upstairs. And we'll probably take tours through here and have wine down here, wine sampling down here.

DePue: Ah, now I like that idea. And here's some more antiques.

Wieneke: There's some antiques I've been buying. Yeah, there's an antique press and an antique crusher. You turn that and the grapes go in there and it crushes them. And that's another style of a crusher. So that's how they used to do it, put it over top of a barrel and crank the handle.

DePue: Well, let's finish off with some more general questions for you. And since it's a little bit cooler down here than it is outside let's do it here. What do you see for the future, not just for yourself, but for the future of farming in this region?

Wieneke: Well, Calhoun is kind of special. You've got all these people coming in and I'd like to see more vineyards and more orchards and that would bring in more people, so.

DePue: More of a specialty kind of thing.

Wieneke: Right. Just because I've got a vineyard and a winery—I'd like to see more. People take a trip, they don't want to just go to one and then go back. They want to go to four or five and spend a half a day, and that would be more—that would be a lot better.

DePue: Now it certainly is impressive you've had 160, then eighty acres of land that's stayed in the Wieneke family for generation after generation. What comes after Bobby?

Wieneke: (laughter) We don't know yet. That's hopefully a long ways down the road. And we'll just see where this vineyard and winery will take us.

DePue: I know you're married. Do you have a couple stepchildren?

Wieneke: I have, right. I have three stepchildren and five step-grandchildren and it's just me and my dad on the farm right now and hopefully maybe they'll come around and start helping.

DePue: But right now any of the three implying to kind of follow in you and your dad's footsteps?

Wieneke: The way of the country is away from all the farming and the hard work, and we just don't know, you know? It's hard to say.

DePue: And your brother is Tommy?

Wieneke: Terry.

DePue: Terry, yes. He has any kids that might be interested?

Wieneke: No, he has no children either and, I don't know, he might have to come up and help me one of these days. I'll cut him in, I guess.

DePue: But from everything you've told us, it would be important to you emotionally, and your father too, I would think, to keep it in the family line someplace.

Wieneke: Yes, we'll keep it in the Wieneke family or our cousins or something somewhere. Somewhere down the road.

DePue: Okay, and for our final question, if somebody did want to go into this line of business, into farming and specialty farming that you've gotten into over time, what would your recommendation be?

Wieneke: I'd say start out slow and use the money, your extra money, and always work towards a goal. Every day I do something towards the grapes, the winery, the peaches. I'm building, I'm thinking I might pick up material on the way home, read books—it's just a constant, What can I do next, what can I do next? I've got another step to go—plant more grapes, build a shed, if I can trade some of my machinery off for maybe an orchard tractor or something I can use towards this whole operation, well, that's what I'm heading for.

DePue: And it looks to me like you've been very careful not to get yourself luggage with a lot of debt in the process.

Wieneke: Exactly. That store I had, I learned a lot of valuable lessons. I learned not to go in too deep a debt. And another thing that most people don't do is if you stick with something, don't be afraid to up and change. Don't be afraid to sell something you've been working with for four or five years and you got your heart into it. Don't be afraid to say, "That's it," you know? "I can't make no money; I can see the future." Don't be afraid to step away and try something different.

DePue: Well, I think that's very good advice to give to anybody.

Wieneke: Yeah, that's what I've found. Don't be afraid—don't go down with the ship, you know? Basically. Try something different. And the next time around you'll be smarter, you'll know not to borrow too heavy. Those payments will kill you trying to make the payment and then you can't add to your operation. Keep everything paid off, and your extra money, just start building another acre of grapes then the next year you've got two acres and three, and go to auctions and pick up equipment whenever that'll pertain to your operation and help you.

DePue: Well, I wish you the best of luck. I'd love to be able to come back in about five or ten years, bring the family, and sit down someplace and enjoy some wine, a little bit of grape wine and

peach wine. It's been a lot of fun today talking to you, Bobby, and hearing about your vision and seeing what hard work can get you.

Wieneke: Yeah, you got to stick with it and every day do something towards your goal. And finally—you know, you can't look at 1,000 peach trees and say, "Man, I got too much work." You got to get out there and knock out one and two, and knock out ten, and the next thing you know you're done. You can't get scared.

DePue: Great. Any final words for us?

Wieneke: No, we're just going to—I'm going to take this winery, take it and see how far I can actually go with this.

DePue: That'll be a lot of fun and a lot of hard work.

Wieneke: I've got not much invested, a lot of hard work, and we're just going to see where it goes.

DePue: A day like today you can honestly say you've got sweat equity.

Wieneke: (laughter) Yeah.

DePue: Thank you very much, Bobby, it's been a blast to talk to you.

Wieneke: All right, thank you.

(End of interview)