



Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

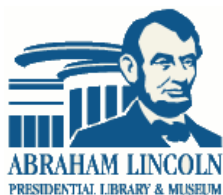
Catalog Number: ISM_18_HolstBri
Interviewee: Brian Holst
Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco
Interview Date: October 1, 2008
Interview Location: Moline, IL
Recording Format: Digital Video (.avi; original HD .M2T requiring proprietary software available)
Recording Length: 42 minutes (plus 55 minute walk & talk that is not transcribed)
Recording Engineer: Robert Warren
Repositories: Oral History Archive, Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Illinois; Oral History Archive, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois
Transcript Length: 12 pages
Transcriber: Tape Transcription Center, The Skill Bureau, Boston, Massachusetts
Editor: Michael Maniscalco and Tony Collantino
Indexer: James S. Oliver

Abstract: Brian Holst was born on August 14, 1964 in Iowa City, Iowa. He is the son of a farmer and grew up on his families' dairy farm. In the 1980's Brian was graduating from high school and found himself in the center of the 1980's farm crisis. He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, but his father pushed him to go to school. Brian ended up going to a trade school where he became a mechanic. After a few years of working on small cars, he decided that due to his size and the small size of cars he needed another way to do his job. He went back to school to become an Agricultural Implements, Tractor and Combine Mechanic. After graduating, Brian was offered a job in Texas where he worked on agricultural machinery that was used to harvest rice. This new form of agriculture opened Brian's eyes to the diverse world of agriculture and machinery. While working in dealerships he took every opportunity to fix the older model two cylinder tractors. With this experience, hard work ethic, and his ability to network, eventually Brian found himself in Moline, IL working in the John Deere Collectors Center restoring vintage tractors.

Keywords: Iowa City, IA; Texas; Trade School; Mechanic; Agricultural Implements; Rice Harvest; Machinery; Moline, IL; John Deere; Vintage Tractors

Citation: Oral History Archives, Illinois State Museum and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois

Copyright: © 2009, Illinois State Museum and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. Permission to quote from the transcript under the fair-use provision of the copyright law (Title 17, U.S. Code) is granted provided that this source is cited.



Interview with Brian Holst

ISM_18_HolstBri

October 1, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: All right. Today is October 1, 2008. We're sitting here at the John Deere Collectors Center, and we're sitting with Brian Holst. How are you doing, Brian?

Holst: I'm doing very well today.

Maniscalco: Great. Well, it's really a lot of fun to sit here in the Collectors Center with you and get the opportunity to talk with you. We'll start out with the real easy, general questions, so we'll start age, date of birth.

Holst: Okay, I'm 44 years old. I was born on August 14, 1964.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Where were you born?

Holst: I was born in Iowa City, Iowa.

Maniscalco: OK, now I think from your biographical form, it seems like you grew up on a farm.

Holst: Yes, born and raised. Lived on a dairy farm, and all through high school and college. It was a family dairy farm, very small in comparison to today's standards, but we had between forty—we were around forty head of Holstein cattle, so we were quite busy. Had 120 acres of row crop and I rented additional more as time went on. upwards to about 200 towards the end. So it wasn't a large farm, but just a very fun family farm.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Now, of course you had your mother and your father there. What about any siblings?

Holst: I had one younger sister, one younger sister. And she's five years younger than me, so she didn't get into the farm work like I did, because by the time she was ready to help out along the farm, I was moving into the college years, so I wasn't around quite as much then.

Maniscalco: Oh, okay. Now what about your grandma and grandpa? Were they around, or...?

Holst: My grandma and grandpa, they farmed the same grounds that we farmed. Like I said, it was a family farm. Our family—my dad's family settled in this area in 1852, bought some farm ground from a gentleman, and the farm ground is still in the family. It is farmed by a family member; a cousin right now is farming that ground. So we've been in the area quite a long time. My daughters would have been the fifth generation—I was the fourth generation—to farm that ground.

Maniscalco: Wow. Now, do you know where your grandfather came from to...?

Holst: My grandfather was born here in the States, here in Iowa. His grandparents—or his parents—came from the Holstein-Schleswig area of Germany. And my—the woman that he married came from that same area. She was actually born in Germany but was raised here. As an infant, they moved.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Now, what about like aunts and uncles growing up? Did you have any aunts and uncles around, or...?

Holst: I had quite a bit of aunts and uncles. Both sides—my mom’s side and my dad’s side—both farmed. Opposite ends of the county, but... So I got to cover a lot of territory when I was a young kid, running from farm to farm. (laughter) Dairy farmers, hog farmers, one of my uncles, along with hog farming, ran a corn shelling business. So I’d help him on summers and weekends. We were always baling hay somewhere. (laughter) That’s all I seemed to do in my high school days, was cut hay, mow hay, crimp hay, bale hay, and then start it all over again. Because we had a dairy farm, and we made a lot of hay, and when we weren’t baling, we were helping other family members. I still remember helping my grandfather bale hay, and he was in his—oh, he’d have been in his late sixties, baling hay on his farm, you know. He had a few head of cattle they played with. But we were always doing something somewhere.

Maniscalco: Wow, wow. Now, when you were very young, where did you go to grade school?

Holst: I took my entire school through Durant Community School District in Durant, Iowa. It’s the same school system my father went to when he was younger. Like I said, we didn’t move very far. There were a few teachers that taught dad that I got—that had to teach me. So like I said, I started my grade school in one building and finished at the other end of the building thirteen years later.

Maniscalco: Wow, wow. So how was that, having the same teachers as your father? Were you able to commiserate about teachers together, or...? (laughter)

Holst: Well, later in life we did. Of course, there were some times I’d wonder if they compared me to my father, because after many years out of school and working in that town again, later in life, I found out my father cut a pretty wide path at times. And I was the angel, I’m thinking, but... So I wonder if they had their radar up, looking for him—“Oh, there’s one of them guys. We know his family,” you know. Because all of my cousins went to the same school I did. So I mean, it’s a small, small German community. Everybody knew everybody. You know, you had your hometown family names that had been there forever, and our name was amongst those. We weren’t the oldest, by any means, but we’d been around a long time. And people knew people who knew... You could never get away with nothing. (laughter) I could do something at one end of town, and by the time I got out to the farm, my folks already knew, so...

Maniscalco: Oh, my gosh. (laughter)

Holst: You couldn’t get away with nothing.

Maniscalco: So going to this small community school, were kids getting bused in from different areas, or how was it—I mean...

Holst: Yes. We had a small school. The high school had about 300 people in it—the kids, students—so we were bused in from about a ten-mile radius—round numbers. I was one of the more further out within the district, so having other kids in my grade close by wasn’t usually an opportunity. There was one or two guys that were in my class that we would get together once in a while, ride three-wheelers, motorcycles, go sledding, or something like that. But it was neat. You knew everybody, obviously. When you were a senior, you knew the freshmen coming in, and chances were you knew their older siblings, or your folks knew their folks. My graduating class was sixty-four, and I probably want to say about fifty of those, I knew from kindergarten on. So it’s quite unique. You had a nice, tight circle of friends, and you knew everybody. We all got along pretty good. And you got to.

- Maniscalco: Yeah. No, it had to have been hard—you mentioned being in a small town, you couldn't do anything or get away with anything and then get home without it already getting there. That must have been hard in school that way as well.
- Holst: Yeah. I mean, everybody knew everybody's—I won't say deep business—but you knew what people were doing, kind of where they lived, you knew when they started harvesting—that was always the talk of the farm boys. And some of the city—what we called the city kids, the folks that lived in town, they couldn't care less. But, “Hey,” you know, “How's the yield's doing?” “My dad says it's this.” And of course, the typical first liar in got a chance starts at a young age. After watching our parents rib each other, we started ribbing each other. But it was a lot of fun. You knew a lot of people. You know, worked out or you dealt with it.
- Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned something about town kids, and then I guess you could consider yourself more of a country kid?
- Holst: Oh, I'm farm-raised. We like to say we're Iowa bred and corn-fed—or Iowa bred and cornbread-fed. (laughter) It was one of those deals—the football team was a pretty thick bunch of guys. We all ate well, we all worked hard, and we had a lot of fun. We couldn't play football worth a hoot, but I would put anybody up against us in baling hay. (laughter) If they had a sport like that in school, we'd be in good shape. (laughter) The farm boys, they kind of hung together, because—we didn't have like a real deep city; like I said, it was a town of about 1,500, 2,000 people—and a lot of our city friends, the kids that grew up in town there, wanted to come out to the farm and help out. And we always enjoyed it because less chores for us, and you could do it with somebody you liked to be with. And we always liked to spend time in town, because we thought that was a vacation. Chores there consisted of taking out the trash and feeding the dog, and we're used to feeding the hogs and feeding the cows, milk on the dairy farm, or running silage out to the cows, or whatever it was. So their chores were a little bit lighter duty than ours.
- Maniscalco: So with such differences between town kids and farm kids, were there ever any conflicts with them there?
- Holst: No. There were times when I think some of the farm kids were a bit more jealous of the free time. You know, they could go up for other activities that, you know, we've got to be home to do this—baseball, right in the middle of summer. A little bit of—I won't say animosity—but just—you knew it was there, but you didn't have a choice. You did what the folks said, and you went on. Some of us did get to participate in a couple sports, a couple extracurricular activities, to broaden our horizons. Our folks were very good about that.
- As I got older and into high school, I was never given a curfew. All dad would tell me was, “If you can hoot with the owls, you can crow with the roosters.” In other words, Stay out as late as you want, but come 4:30, you're out in the barn helping me milk cows. And there was a couple mornings that lesson was a pretty tough thing to learn. (laughter) But you learn, and that's part of the responsibility. You learn to take responsibility for your actions, and if you wanted to stay out late one night and hoot and holler with the boys, you just better make sure you're in the barn in the morning, or you had the wrath of Dad. (laughter) And Mom was right on his heels, too, so...
- Maniscalco: So that leads right into the next thing I was going to ask you about, which is chores. I mean, you had to have tons of chores.

Holst: There was plenty to go around. Growing up, you know, elementary, my chores were fairly light duty. Basically after school, I'd get off the school bus, had a quick chance to get a bite to eat, snack, whatever, and then it was out to the dairy farm. Feeding calves—we raised all our own replacement livestock—so we had to feed calves, we had to bed them, hay. We had hogs when I was very young, so there was always something to do in the hog barns. If it wasn't that, we were grinding feed for the dairy cows to feed them, or we were hauling manure—whatever it took. In the spring and fall, we were doing farm work.

I'd get off the school bus at the tender age of—nine, ten years old—and I'd climb into a 100-horse tractor and spend three, four hours doing that before I even did homework. (laughter) Nowadays, that's probably not the most acceptable thing, but my family, it was instilled in them that you grew up to work. Child labor's a good thing in their eyes. I didn't get hurt, you know, and I don't think it hurt my work ethic one bit. I've been accused of being a little demanding to my kids upon occasion, because I expect some chores to be done that don't maybe get done on time or to my liking, but I think chores is a very good responsibility builder. It builds character. It shows commitment. And we were always doing something. When we weren't working on chores, we were having fun. We were playing—building forts, and we had—like I said, we had three-wheelers—riding those around, terrorizing the waterways, and all of the livestock or the wildlife we can scare up—pheasants and squirrels and everything like that. So there was always action going on, and if not, you made your own. (laughter)

Maniscalco: So which chores were the best chores to do? There had to be good ones and bad ones.

Holst: Probably the best chores—and I didn't appreciate it at the time—was feeding calves—bottle calves. I thought that was just mundane work, because you filled the milk up, you put the bottle in, and you watched them eat it, and you took the bottle and cleaned it. But later on, I got to where I was missing that, because my sister did take that over when she became eight, nine years old, and I was on to the more unpleasant task of hauling manure, pitch forking it by hand—that was always just a gruesome, gruesome thing to do, just painful. You had to walk, carry it... The only fun part was you'd get to drive the tractor to unload it, but... So the more loads you get, the more tractor-driving you got. But that was probably the thing that at the time I thought was pretty rough work, but that was pretty nice.

I enjoyed working with cattle—still do to this day. There's nothing to me more satisfying than taking a calf—newborn calf—watching it take its first steps, nurturing it, and then raising it up into a production animal, whether it beef or dairy, and you know that you've done something. It's a two-year process to get it to that point. So you get some ups and downs; you get some good things and bad things along with everything.

Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned your sister taking over one of your chores. Were there certain chores that were for girls, certain chores that were for boys...?

Holst: My father didn't believe so, and he tried to teach both of us the same thing. Now, some things were easier adapted to myself, and some things were easier for my sister. So each one—we kind of went off in our own specialty areas, and there are some things that I did ever since I could start doing chores. You know, when it came to vaccinating calves, that was my job. My sister could never get past the needle aspect. Which is fine—it doesn't take long, and it's pretty simple. There were some things that physically, she couldn't do—when you break an animal to lead, it takes a pretty strong arm and pretty fast feet, so she never got into that. Same with

baling hay. She could lift some bales, but not keep it up on a day-in, day-out basis, so there were some things, yeah.

Did I learn to cook and clean? You bet. I didn't get out of that. Of course, later in life, that turned out better when I was in college, because I wasn't going to starve, I made sure of that. So yeah, we all had our areas of preferability, and just physically, we just couldn't do some things, but we had an understanding on how each side worked and what it took. Because when she would stay overnight at her friends' or I'd have a sports activity, we'd have to pitch in. Everybody takes over a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Just because you're not there doesn't mean the chores don't need to be done. And when you're on a dairy farm, you're there morning and night—you know, it has to be...

Maniscalco: Now, there's other organizations other than school out there, like 4-H, FFA... Were you involved in any of those other farming organizations?

Holst: I was very much involved in 4-H. I started when I was nine years old, and I took it clear through as far as I could—I think it was up to age nineteen at that time. Very active in it. I was active in the club, in the county organization. I held every office on the club level at one point, I was on county council. I did try to run for state council, but I didn't quite make it—but had a lot of fun. Met a lot of wonderful people—friends I'm still in contact with today from that whole event. I know people from across the state that I got to either show against, or when we went to camps or citizenship trips, and I got to know people from other counties. I built a lasting friendship with a lot of those folks.

So very much—very involved with it. It really got me into public speaking, or at least somewhat comfortable with it—so I don't know if I'll ever be totally comfortable. But it really opened up my eyes to what the possibilities were. If I'd have stayed on the farm, probably wouldn't have as much confidence in some of my abilities in that respect, so I think it's very positive. My kids are involved in 4-H. Granted, they don't do the same projects that I did. I worked a lot with the animals, woodworking, that type of thing, where they're more into horticulture. Again, I have daughters. They're into the sewing, the fashion shows, that type of thing.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, one of the other organizations out there that's very prevalent in a lot of rural communities is church. Was your family involved in going to church?

Holst: The family was not involved actively in participating in church on a weekly basis. We were Christian, no doubt about it, but with the dairy farm, you know, you're there 5:00 in the morning until 8:30, 9:00 in the morning, and just so much going on that it just—I hate to say it never fit in, but it just didn't work right with the other farm responsibilities. Christmas, Easter, some of the holidays that way, yeah, we were there. When we could attend some of the late church services, it worked out better that way. Did attend when I was younger, a lot, with my uncles who didn't have—or aunts and uncles who didn't have the livestock responsibilities. So they'd take me along for Sunday School, situations like that. So it was very much there, it just was not a weekly participation basis. Since I don't have any livestock, yeah, we attend church every Sunday. I have a great community group there that is just wonderful.

Maniscalco: Yeah, and you just led to the next point, which is church isn't always about just going to church on Sunday, but there's also different community organizations and things surrounding around that. Was your family involved in those things like you are now, or...?

Holst: Not as much, nope. Mom and Dad, they stuck pretty close to the farm. I mean, they didn't get to college. They stuck pretty close to the farm, because their understanding, to make things work, you put everything you had into that project. In this case, it was farming. And they made a livelihood of it. They raised a family of four on 120 acres, which is kind of tough, in the late seventies and eighties when farming wasn't that good. So their commitment was to the farm. They were committed to us kids, broadening our horizons. That's the 4-H, the church activities, the school activities. So they helped us become a little bit broader in our knowledge of the world, and they made sure that we had those opportunities.

Maniscalco: Well, that's great. Now, you went to college—

Holst: Yes.

Maniscalco: —at one point. And what did you end up going for, and...?

Holst: Well, originally, I started off—was never really that keen into books. I liked being outdoors, and I liked working with my hands. I was fairly decent in the shop programs at the high school, so I decided to continue in something in that area. Started off thinking I could be a—or I wanted to be an automotive technician, working on cars and trucks. So I took a year's schooling of that—actually, a year and a half. Graduated from that program. Figured out that a man of my size working on a small, compact car is not the best suited for my abilities, so I enrolled in a ag tech program where I learned to be a mechanic on farm machinery. Went to college for two years for that in Ottumwa, Iowa. Graduated and was a full-blown trained mechanic, supposedly, and ready to take on the world. So started my world out working with tools, still work with tools—not so much for a livelihood, but I still enjoy working with my hands and being outdoors. Anything with a motor and steering wheel, you know, I'm game.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Now, why didn't you stay on the farm?

Holst: When I graduated from high school, it was 1982. The economy was still pretty rough. In 1979, the farm economy just flopped here in the Midwest. It was tough. It was real tough. So Dad said, "Son, you're going to college." Of course, me as a young, sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kid said, "I ain't going to college. I want to stay here on the farm; I want to milk more cows." So he said, "Nope, you're going to school." So that's when we decided on the automotive program. Local junior college, could still stay at home, Dad still had a milker, so I could milk at night, earn a little extra income for gas money. Once I figured out that yeah, mechanic is what I want to do but I wanted to move on to the ag mechanic side, that was in a community college that was two and a half hours away.

So once I made that announcement to Dad—and he was all for it—he made the determination that, He's not going to milk cows anymore. So one week before I left for college, for the ag tech program, we sold our dairy cows. He wasn't going to milk them all by himself; he was losing his hired hand. So that was a tough day for everybody in the family. It was a tough decision for Dad, because he'd been milking since he was fifteen years old. And he was at the point where he had some health issues. Nothing serious, but he could tell. The way we were milking, it was not a modern setup by any means, and he figured it was time to cut back for him and concentrate more on just the row-crop farming. He went back to hogs, raising some more of those. So I left for college and come home once or twice a month to help out with the farm work in the falls and the spring. The rest the time I lived in the dorms. So it was a change for everybody. I was on my own, officially, I guess, and Mom and Dad were without the daily chores, so they started doing a little bit more traveling, you know, to see friends and relatives close by.

Maniscalco: Now, after you graduated college, what did you do?

Holst: When I graduated from college, it was 1985. In the ag industry, that is when there was a huge merger between Case Manufacturing and International Harvester. So when that merger hit, there was a severe consolidation of dealerships, and there was a lot of unemployed tractor mechanics out there, whether they were from Case or whether they were from International, they were on the market looking for jobs. Well, any dealerships around was looking for seasoned, quality mechanics, and as a young, recent graduate, a little tough market to break into.

There was an alumnus, who went to the same college I did, who had a standing order for any mechanics coming out of this program to come talk to him down in Texas. So I figured, I'm not attached, I have limited responsibilities, so I decided to take him up on the offer. Went down, had an interview, was hired, and upon graduation, one week later, I was in a U-Haul, heading to Texas. Went to work for a manufacturer down there—not a—but a dealership down there for Allis-Chalmer. I was hired on to be their combine technician, and I spent two and a half years working for that dealership in the rice fields in Texas. So I got a rude awakening. It's not row-crop farming (laughter) like we're used to here in the Midwest.

Maniscalco: So what are some of the differences? I mean, just...

Holst: Rice is a very abrasive crop. A lot of parts wear a lot faster than they do here with corn and soybeans. Just the conditions you work in is extremely unique. Rice takes a lot of water, so there's a lot of water around. The ground down there was a lot different than the Midwest black soil that I was used to. There was a bottom to everything down there, so when things got too wet late in the season, for like planting, they would flood the fields and work them with standing water. The type of dirt down there was a very sticky, gumbo-y type, and once it got onto a tire, it really never pulled off well. But with water, it'd act like a lubricant, and it would peel back off.

So they would work the ground with that, cut the water off, the ground would level out, and it was ready for seeding. There again. If it was dry enough, they'd run in with drills like we're used to seeing here in the Midwest and plant the rice. If not, then they would fly it on with an airplane—seed it by air. And then they'd flood the ground again for the rice to start growing, cut it back off, let it get up so high, and then the rest of its life, it stayed in water until it was ready for harvest, then they'd cut it off again. Working with that. The levee system that they had to use to keep the water in certain paddocks was unique. It was very unique. It's just a different way of farming that I'd never thought I'd ever be exposed to. I understand corn, I understand soybeans, but rice was different. Different needs, different requirements, different harvesting techniques. So it was definitely an enjoyable experience.

Maniscalco: So being a combine technician in this totally different agricultural area, what adaptations were required of you for that?

Holst: Well, mechanics are mechanics. A combine works a certain way. Granted, on a combine, for rice, you ran different threshing cylinders. Up here, we run what's called rasp bars and concaves; down there, they run spike-toothed cylinders. Little different. Unique. A lot more aggressive down there. So I had to get used to what those looked like, how those worked. Still same basic principles, just different application. Again, like I said, higher wear components. We replaced a lot more flighting and auger pans and such like that. Never saw a corn head when I was down there, so you know... We had one farmer try corn, but he combined it with

his grain platform because he wasn't going to make the investment on a corn head for fifty acres. So it was unique; it was different.

Some of the other aspects I had to get used to was the heat. It was incredibly warm, very humid, working with all that moisture around there. It took a little while for me to get adapted to that. Some of the insects down there are a lot more aggressive than what we had here in the Midwest. Tremendous amount of mosquitoes, fire ants. I mean, fire ants are something I'd never heard of until I got down there. (laughter) But it was neat. It was fun. A lot of great people I met down there I still keep in contact with today. The food was fantastic. Those folks can put on a heck of a spread. (laughter) Me being out of college, I was kind of adopted by a couple families down there, and I don't think I spent two nights in my own apartment. I was always over at their house, running around with their kids. I mean, I was still young—under twenty. So we had a lot of fun, we really did.

Maniscalco: How did you get back to Illinois and this area?

Holst: Well, being from the Midwest, you know, you get homesick after a while. I always thought winter was a terrible thing, but you get to missing the seasonal changes down there. They had summer, and they had fall; that's all they had. Up here, we got the four seasons. You miss the changing of the leaves, you miss the snow. I never thought I'd say that when I was young, but you miss the snow. And I wanted to get closer back to my folks. They were on the farm. My sister was gone by then, out on her own. And they were doing all right, but just—it's family. You want to be back home.

So I started working my way back into the Midwest. I got close—I was in western Iowa for a period of time, working out there at a John Deere dealership. That was my first John Deere dealership that I worked at. Again, combine technician and tractor technician. So when the opportunity came for me to move back to the eastern side of the state, I acted upon that, and that landed me back home, where I could help Dad on the weekends, and in the evenings. If he needed help setting augers up, moving the equipment, fixing the barn—whatever it was, I was there. And that was important to me.

Maniscalco: Now, starting farming with your father and then working on this machinery all the way until now, you've seen some pretty drastic changes, I'm sure, in farm technology and farm machinery. Can you tell us a little bit about some of those things?

Holst: Sure. My earliest remembrances of farming was probably in the very late sixties—and I was three, four, five years old at that time—sitting on the tractors, hearing the two-cylinders off in the background—because they were still around. You know, it was only eight, nine years since they were discontinued, so they were still very much a part of farming. Watching the mounted pickers harvest the crops, seeing pull-type combines harvesting soybeans. You'd see the real progressive farmers running actual self-propelled combines, and going and, Wow, that'd be the way to do it. We had pull-type equipment. We were never, like I said, on the leading edge, but we had equipment that worked well.

So watching that come on—seeing the first combine come onto our farm, that was something big, new, and exciting. I'd never seen something that you could just pull into the field and just unload into a wagon. It was self-contained, and that was something unique for us. When we bought our first tractor over 120 horse, that was huge. Just, We'll never need anything bigger. How could somebody need a 200-horse tractor? That's for those folks out west, where you had fields that were acres and acres, where our little fields were thirty-, forty-, fifty-acre patches. Watching machinery go from four-row equipment up to eight-row, to twelve-row, then to

sixteen-row. You know, that was just phenomenally huge. Watching guys with combines start off with two-row heads, like we had, and then the four-row came along shortly thereafter, but those guys that went to six-, eight-row, twelve-row heads, I thought those were big-time operators, and just to see that massive of machinery be able to maneuver through the fields, where just fifteen years ago, there were two-cylinder tractors. You know, an eighty-horsepower was a large-chassis tractor, making several trips back and forth up the field, pulling four-bottom, maybe five-bottom plows. Now, we're pulling nine-bottom plows. We're pulling thirty-foot chisel plows, twenty-six foot disk. I mean, that was big-time farming back in the early seventies.

Then when the first articulate four-wheel drives showed up the neighborhood, those were something you just pulled up alongside the road and just watched them go back and forth on the field, just in awe at the size and the horsepower that those things they could produce, and what productivity they were giving the farmer. So it was unique. And along with that, you had advances in grain handling, drying capabilities. We went from picking corn on the ear, drying it in the cribs, shelling it with a portable sheller that you hired to come in, to storing your own shelled corn in grain bins, drying it on the farm yourself, unloading it, grinding it—just all those technology advancements came onto our farm in the late sixties and early seventies. So it was kind of phenomenal.

And probably the biggest thing that helped, I think, farmers in general, is just the hybrids—the seed hybrids, the herbicides, insecticides. Really made some tremendous advancements—especially in the late eighties—middle-to-late eighties, with all your GMO genes that were introduced, has really made farming quite large productivity results on the same acres we've been farming for ears.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, you worked on a dealership in Texas, you then worked in a dealership in western Iowa. Being in a dealership, I'm sure you heard the little rumors of, Oh, he's now got this kind of seed, or he's buying this kind of tractor. What was it like working in a dealership?

Holst: It was unique. Being raised on a farm, I knew farming, I knew how to plant. I didn't know, probably, the science behind, Okay, what's Sultan™ results do, and how to apply that. I never got to that. That was always Dad's responsibility—which I did work later on. But watching guys make adjustments to their combine, how to better prepare the seed beds to get that better crop, what they were using for nitrogen capabilities. Some guys were into microbial adaptations to their soils. Some people called that on the fringes; some people thought that was the greatest thing. I was first introduced to low-impact farming, where you did a lot more organic. You didn't use the herbicides, insecticides like the other farmers did—what kind of results they got.

We always heard in the coffee shops what was going on, but it was neat when they would come in to have their equipment worked on. You had a chance to talk to them one-on-one, and you got to learn from a very diverse group of people. You had some folks that were incredibly well-educated in the sciences, some people were very well-educated in financial background, other people never made it off the farm. Some folks never got through high school—eighth grade graduation, they were back on the farm. They were usually the older generation, but still. They were not dumb by any means. They may not have the worldly knowledge of corporate finance, but they understood finances in their own way and learned how to apply it to their situation. And a lot of them were very successful. So you got to learn a lot of the old-school thoughts, to some of the new-school thoughts, and you picked and choose what you wanted to learn and retain to use later on in your life. So it was unique, it really was.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Now, how did you get from the implement dealership in western Iowa to the Collectors Center here?

Holst: Sure.

Maniscalco: I mean, they're both John Deere, but how do you make that change? (laughter)

Holst: They're both John Deere... It was unique. When I was in college, part of the curriculum was on-the-job training. So again, like I said, times were still a little tough in the farm economy. Dealerships were pretty conservative. So I had the opportunity to work at a salvage yard as my on-the-job training. Well, this salvage yard dealt with John Deere only and stuck more toward the two-cylinder, the pre-1960 tractors. And he had a repair shop in there, and we also sold salvaged parts. So I kind of cut my teeth working on two-cylinder tractors, taking them apart, putting some pieces back on—that was reserved for the guys who knew what they were doing more so. I was there to learn. So I helped a lot. I got into painting tractors for this individual. And I got to where I understood them. We called it "talking two-cylinder."

So when I graduated, like I said, I went to my other dealers, and whenever a two-cylinder tractor would come into the dealership, all the mechanics said, "Hey, I worked on enough of those; I don't want to work on anymore." And I said, "I know how to work on those. Let me work on them. I feel comfortable here. This way, I know what I'm doing 100 percent"—where the newer tractors, I understood them, and as time went on, I got to like working on them. But they were new, they were unique, and the other guys wanted to work on all of those. So I got to do all what they didn't want to do—little man on the totem pole type thing—and that was fine with me.

So as time went on, the dealerships I went to, more and more, the older guys were retiring, and it got to—when you work at a dealership, you build a following of customers. They know what you're capable of, and they know what you can do, and word-of-mouth spreads, and one thing leads to another, and pretty soon you've got new customers coming from other dealership areas. Maybe not their whole business, but, Hey, I heard you can do this. I heard you're good at it from so-and-so, and they bring it to you. And it makes you feel real good. And that's just not two-cylinders, that's other areas, too—baler mechanics, combine technicians, so on and so forth. So eventually I got known for that in some of the areas, and I had an opportunity to move into the parts department.

I realized that mechanicking was tough. Your hands were never fully healed; they were always nicked up. And I thought, Well, I'd better look at expanding my horizons before I get too old and not be able to." So I went to work in the parts department, and I really enjoyed that. Well, while I was working there, I ran into a gentleman who restored antique tractors, and became good friends with him, and we'd build up a relationship that I could find parts that nobody else wanted to look for, could find. So again, I build up a reputation of going the extra mile for that really obscure thing that somebody was looking for. And as time went on, we kept in contact, and he ultimately was part of the initial setup of the Collectors Center. And when we first started, we were looking to sell parts, and he gave me a call, said, "Would you be interested in something like this?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, you still got to go through all the processes—nothing's a guarantee—but why don't you throw your name in the hat?" And I did and ultimately got hired. So that's how I got to the Collectors Center.

Maniscalco: So what do you do here at the Collectors Center? (laughter)

Holst: Well, I moved from selling the parts to—when this gentleman who hired me retired, I took over his position as manager. What I do here—I’m in charge of the day-to-day operations. We are actively restoring tractors in our back shop. I work closely with the technician back there. Again, still that mechanical mindset of mine; I can’t keep my hands off the tools. I always like to tell people, “He lets me work down there until I break something, and then he tells me to go away.” But I’m responsible for the finances of the facility. Ultimately, all the parts ordering is run through me. I don’t do the processes, but I make sure everything’s here, everything’s paid for. I also work with our licensing department on reproduction parts. We’re part of the approval process. We’re not solely in charge of it, but we’re an integral cog in it. Make sure the parts are accurate as close as possible.

We don’t get into the warrantable issues of it being a good part, we’re more into the authentic side—making sure it meets specs as far as dimensions, getting them as close as possible. Because a lot of folks in the restoration business want something that is—or looks very similar to—original. And that’s very important, because so many of these parts have been reproduced so many times, they don’t have the look of an original piece. And we strive to keep things as close to original in our restoration department and found that there were some items that could be improved, and we wanted to work with the suppliers who were doing that, to help them make a better product that represents this company.

Maniscalco: Very neat. I guess maybe this would be a good time to go walk out into the Collectors Center. Maybe we can go look at some of the tractors—

Holst: Sure.

Maniscalco: —and if you can kind of show us, and describe some of the different things.

Holst: Be more than happy to. Sure.

(end of interview)