



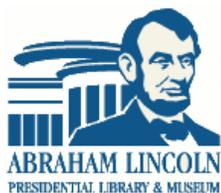
Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

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Abstract: Wayne Rendleman Sirles was born December 13th 1941 in Saint Louis, Missouri. After an unexpected early death of his father, he and his mother moved back to her family farm. From that point forward Wayne’s male role models were his Grandfather and Uncle who were in the orchard business together. With no other male heirs in the family Wayne was the logical choice to take over the farm, and it is now owned by Wayne, his wife, Betty, and his son. Wayne is in charge of all operations and is carrying on a family tradition on this same farm which started in 1873 when one of his ancestors migrated from the Carolinas to Illinois. The farm began as a diversified livestock, vegetable and fruit farm that was 88 acres. The farm is now over 750 acres and is mostly peaches and apples with some vegetable crops. At the peak of the busy season the farm employs approximately 80 people to pick fruits and vegetables, wash and grade the products from the field, and pack and label produce for grocery stores. Rendleman Orchards sells its produce mostly in a wholesale market but does have an onsite farmers market where local produce is sold along with other locally made farm products.

Keywords: St Louis, MO; Early Death; Family Farm; Male Role Models; Orchard Business; Male Heirs; Farm Operation; Family Tradition; Ancestors; Migration; Diversified Livestock; Vegetables; Fruit; Peaches; Apples; Grocery Stores; Rendleman Orchards; Wholesale Market; Onsite Farmers Market; Local Produce; Locally Made Farm Products

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Wayne "Ren" Sirles

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Interview with Wayne Sirles

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July 23, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

(production cross-talk, not transcribed)

Maniscalco: Is it Wayne or Ren?

Sirles: My official name is Wayne Rendleman Sirles, and Rendleman, of course, is my mother’s side of the family, and so therefore I carry her middle name, and when I was five years old we had a tragedy; my father died of a heart attack, and he was a medical doctor, and my mother had four small children, seven and under, and how come I’m back here on the farm is at that time this farm was run by my grandfather and his son, which was my uncle, and family took care of family. So being with four small children under seven, my mother moved back here to move with my grandfather and his wife, my grandmother, and a maiden aunt, and so I was raised here since I was five years old. And so that’s why whenever—I just basically consider this all the time my home, and that’s... So that’s where I came up with the nickname Ren, and that’s short for Rendleman. But being here, like I said earlier, we have been here for 135 years; you do not change the name that easy ‘cause everybody knows Rendleman Orchards and therefore we keep in the same name.

Maniscalco: Okay. Well, we’re probably going to have you go over that again once we start, (laughter) ‘cause it’s a great history! Are you guys ready? Okay.

(pause in recording)

Sirles: Oh, I thought it was recording, okay!

Maniscalco: Today is July 23, 2008. We’re sitting outside of Alto Pass, and we’re sitting with Wayne “Ren” Sirles. How are you doing?

Sirles: I’m fine, thank you.

Maniscalco: Great. We’re going to start out with lots of the easy questions and then we’ll get to the harder ones. Some of the first ones I’d like you to—can you tell us when was your date of birth and where were you born?

Sirles: I was born December 13, 1941 in St. Louis, Missouri.

Maniscalco: Really? Now, did you grow up on this farm here?

Sirles: Yes. I was born in St. Louis ‘cause my father was studying, a resident at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis through Washington U, and then he graduated from that and he served in the Armed Services during World War II from ’42-’45, and he came out and started practicing on his private practice. He’s an ENT specialist, and he had a heart attack and died after he was at his private practice for six months, and so at that time my mother had four small children under seven, me being one, and so then we came back and lived with my grandfather and grandmother and a maiden aunt here on the farm. So basically I have been raised on this farm since I’ve been five years old.

Maniscalco: Great. Can you kind of tell us, what’s the family that’s living here now? What’s the family (inaudible speech)

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Sirles: My mother's still alive. She's ninety-seven.

Maniscalco: Oh, my gosh!

Sirles: She lives here in this house by herself still yet, of course, and I live just right about 300 feet farther up from this house, and then my... Part of this house here is 160 years old, and so it's still in the family. She's here. My wife, myself, and we have one son back in business, and he has a wife and two children, they're back, live here on the farm, and then I have a daughter that is married and has two children, and they just live right across the road. So therefore, basically I'm the fourth generation, my son and daughter are the fifth, and we're raising the sixth generation out on the same farm.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow! You should be very proud of that! (laughter) That's very cool. So now you said your mother's living here.

Sirles: Right.

Maniscalco: Are there any other of her generation around, still around?

Sirles: No. She's the last one of her generation.

Maniscalco: Okay. Now, do you have any other relatives around this area?

Sirles: There are several Rendlemans everywhere, and why that was so many of 'em and we're related, somewhere, maybe the sixth, seventh cousin, they were eleven children came out of North Carolina in the sixties, 1860s, and they came into this area and then they dispersed from here and went all over, and of course then they had children and children and generations, and so whenever basically somebody says the Rendlemans, yes, we're related basically from the original family that came out of North Carolina, and they actually came from the small town of Rendleman, North Carolina. And the distinction of Rendleman, North Carolina is that's where Richard Petty's from, the NASCAR driver!

Maniscalco: Great! Now, your last name is Sirles and you just explained to us a minute ago, you know, your nickname is Ren and your middle name is Rendleman. Can you kind of explain to us that story again?

Sirles: Well, like I said earlier is that my mother's a Rendleman side, and she married Wayne Sirles, who was actually the only child, and there's no one of that side of the family alive anymore, and so that was is... And the tragedy, like I said earlier, in our family, we came back here and she came back to teach school at her hometown of Alto Pass and I was raised here on the farm with my grandfather and uncle. They were in business together. My uncle only had one daughter and she married a professional person up northern part of the state, so therefore I was right here so we ended up farming together, and then when my grandfather died, my uncle James Rendleman and myself formed a partnership, then when he died, we formed a corporation, and now the farm here is owned by my wife, my son, and I. We own all the farm. We bought all the other heirs out. So as of today we own the farm that we're here on, and it's been, like I said, the first eighty-eight acres was bought in 1873.

Maniscalco: Wow! Can you kind of give us a little bit of a history? I mean, you just said it was the first eighty-eight acres, so beyond that? So it started out at eighty-eight acres, but...

Sirles: Well, what happened, when the Rendleman family came out of Rendleman, North Carolina right out of the Civil War, and actually they settled south of a little town about fourteen miles

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from here called Johnsbury, Illinois, at Buttermilk Creek, and then there they dispersed, and John James Rendleman, who is my great-grandfather, met Isabel Keith and they became married, and it just so happened Isabel Keith’s father owned the original eighty-eight acres, and whenever they got married he bought the eighty-eight acres, and this house at that time was like four rooms, and therefore he owned the farm there in 1873 and Isabel Keith’s parents moved to town of Alto Pass. And then, of course, John James Rendleman’s son was Grover Rendleman, who was my grandfather, and then it was passed to James Rendleman and on down.

Maniscalco: Great. Now, over time, you know, it started out as eighty-eight acres. Through those different generations it didn’t remain eighty-eight acres.

Sirles: We have about 800 as of today. My grandfather had a rule: If land came up for sale next to you and you could afford it and make money off of it, buy it. If there was some land in between, don’t buy it. So we have ended up with right at—I think we pay taxes on 796 acres. It’s all continuous.

Maniscalco: Wow. That’s a large lot of land you’re on!

Sirles: Well, you have to understand—and that sounds... Good farm ground in Southern Illinois is you buy two acres, or you buy three acres and you can farm one. Excellent farm ground in Southern Illinois in this area is you buy two acres and you can farm one, because we have the hills, the valleys, and you can see the woods and that, and a lot of this land that we own basically just holds the world together. Now, the best ground in Union County, of course, is what we call the Mississippi Bottoms, and it’s just right west of us about two miles where the crow flies, or three miles, and that’s, of course, all in the river bottom, and it’s nice and level, and they farm pretty well almost all the tillable acres they can. But here right where we’re sitting is you basically have to have about three acres to farm one. But that is the reason why, the hills and the valleys and everything, is the reason why we can raise fruit, because of the air currents and the temperature diversions and everything, whereas you go down to the bottom or up farther north where it’s all level, you have a lot of frost damage and stuff.

Maniscalco: Interesting. That’s great. You grew up basically here.

Sirles: Right.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of tell us a little bit about your childhood on the farm?

Sirles: Well, today we have a lot more modern conveniences, let’s say, than when I grew up, but we grew up well. I have no complaints there. We just grew up as farm kids. We worked, had chores, we went to school, we had chores at night, had chores in the morning. We didn’t have all the convenience of some of the kids in towns and cities, of course, but then we also were much closer to the land. We were able to hunt and do a lot of things that some other kids were not able to do, so I have no complaints, but I don’t want to go back to the good old days, (laughter) because we did have the outhouses and the water that was very scarce at times ‘cause it was all impounded through cisterns and stuff. But we lived, had a good time, had a good life, so I have no complaints or anything at all.

Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned chores; what were some of the chores you had to do?

Sirles: Well, we had chickens. Well, of course, you fed ‘em, you watered ‘em. We had eggs. My grandfather’s side, he would raise eggs to send to the hatchery for little chicks. Had to gather

them every day. We had milk cows. We milked cows in the morning and the afternoon. We had some dairy cattle, and then we also had a mule or two or some horses. And the history of this farm is—to give you an idea, which is kind of birding off of that, is before my time, but in the Great Depression in the thirties my grandfather saved the farm by buying and selling mules. At one time he had 167 head of mules on his farm. He had a knack of seeing a mule at one area and maybe fifty or sixty miles away see another mule, and in his mind he knew they would make a team. He hired men during the Depression and broke those mules to become teams, and I asked him, “Well, why the teams?” He said back then most people had twenty, forty, sixty acres; everybody had to have either a team of mules or a team of horses, and he never did care for horses. So he always had the mules, and so he got a reputation, a quite large reputation even down in the South, down in Mississippi and down in Tennessee and all down in there that he was able to get mules or have teams of mules of a certain size that they would want for their tobacco or something on that order.

Maniscalco: It sounds like your grandfather was very ingenuitive.

Sirles: Well, he was born in 1884, so his name was Grover Cleveland Rendleman, so that’s not very hard to figure out the politics of this family. (laughter) And he went through—there’s a depression in the very beginning of the 20th Century, and then he went through the Great Depression, and he had children and he had families, families here of people working for him, and so he had to know what to do. And I will give you an example of why—he and all our family, my mother and everybody, ‘cause she was the first one in our family to graduate from college, and she became a teacher, but when I was raised here with my grandfather he said, “Not if you go to college, when you go to college,” and I said one time to him, “Well, why I don’t have a choice?” And he said, “Well, I’ll tell you a story,” and he never told me this story before. He said, “I had an eighth grade education,” and that’s fine. That’s a lot back there in his time. And he said, “During the Depression, he had owned 556 acres at that time, and he had to borrow \$5,000. He went to the local bank and the local bank had already loaned him some money on wagons and mules and stuff, and they said, “No, we cannot loan you any more money.” So he went to another town about eight, nine miles from us called Anna, wanted to borrow \$5,000. He said he went into the Anna National Bank. The man’s name was James Jackson, Jimmy Jackson, he said. He said, “Mr. Jackson, I got 556 acres free and clear, not a mortgage or anything against it, and I need \$5,000 to get my crops in and support the family.” He looked at him and said, “Grover, it’s not worth it. Now, that’s less than \$10 an acre.” And he said, “But do you have anything else?” He says, “Yes, I have a life insurance policy,” and he loaned that on life insurance policy. But the point of that story was is he said, “I could’ve lost everything and I had nothing.” He says, “You go to college and you get your diploma.” He says, “No matter what ever happens in the future, they will never take that diploma away from you. That is yours.” He said, “I could’ve lost everything that I worked forty years for.” So I relate that story to every one of our children and nieces and nephews and our children, because every one now we push, you get that diploma and therefore then you do what you want to do. So that’s a little diversion, but that’s why, as you can gather, I did go to college, get my diploma, my wife did, my son did, my daughter did, and so, to be honest with you, we’re kind of partial—in this family, immediate family there’s eighteen alumni of SIU! (laughter)

Maniscalco: Well, that’s great! Sounds like your grandfather’s a real influential character in your family.

Sirles: My grandfather and my uncle, my grandfather and my uncle were the father figures I never did have. My mother never did remarry, and my uncle was young enough, he took me hunting and

taught me a lot of things. But my grandfather would sit and talk old time, what happened in the past to him and what formed his ideas and why and what, and I think a lot of that is very hard to happen today because this is a very fast moving world. And of course, you gotta understand we grew up with no TV. I mean, we did have the radio but we had no TV. We had more time to sit and talk about family histories, experiences, what happened. And so yes, he was a great influence on my life. So was my uncle and, of course, so was my mother who still (inaudible speech) and taught me and all her children all through school and taught for thirty-eight years. So there’s a lot of stories in the family that is said to us that we can relate to now some way, and that was almost an education in itself. And I know when I was young I said, “Well, what does this old man or old woman know? I’m so much smarter than that!” And I realize the older I get, they were pretty smart! (laughter) I tell you! They knew a lot.

Maniscalco: That’s great. You know, and you just touched on it—I’m kind of interested, you know, how was your education in elementary school, high school, and on up? Where did you go to school?

Sirles: We had a school at that time in the little town of Alto Pass down here. I went to all, both the grade and high school in Alto Pass. Our class size averaged from ten, eleven up to maybe sixteen at the most in a class, but we were fortunate at that time; we had a teacher to every room, so there was not two classes together. I graduated out of a class of eleven, so it was a very small class, but we got a very well—I will say this: we got a very, very well rounded education, and most of the kids, all the kids were, well, even in Alto Pass was considered rural because it’s just a town of 350. All the kids worked, knew what working was, knew that they wanted to do something different. Some went on to become doctors, some became college professors, some went professional and others started their own business and then others worked for big corporations, and so it was a well rounded education. Some, most of them out of my class coming from a rural area—I will say most of the boys, and some of the girls, joined the service to get the GI Bill, to get training. My best friend went to the service. He helped lay the first pipeline, gas pipeline in Greenland for the United States Army. Came out, he became a crane operator and worked himself way up into a very good job with a huge factory operating a crane. He learned it all in the service. So what I’m saying is it was very well rounded, and also we had teachers that says, “You can do better, you can do better,” keep pushing you, keep pushing you, keep pushing you.

Maniscalco: Great. Now, I mean, if you went to school in Alto Pass not everybody in Alto Pass is kind of involved in farm life, rural life, probably not at that time either. Was there kind of conflicts between rural kids and town kids?

Sirles: No. The thing about Alto Pass, most of the jobs in the summer, 95% of the jobs in the summer were out in the rural. They would come and work for my grandfather, and there were several—the Heartline is not in business; they worked at the farm there, the Flams, or the Landry farms. That’s where the employment was for the summer. You were always knowing that you were going to work during the summer. You were going to get money. You were going to get enough money to buy your clothes for school, buy your books for school, and also buy any spending money that you want later on, because none of the families here really basically could afford it. If they could afford it, it would hurt the economic position later on, so it was just understood you’re going to work. So everybody that I knew of, even the girls, the day after school was out you better have a job. If not, you better have a very good reason for not having a job! And of course I had a job, being out here all the time, but there were several of my friends that worked out here.

Maniscalco: So how was it, you know, having friends but yet coworkers that worked for your grandfather, you know?

Sirles: My grandfather and uncle I will give credit; he treated me just as if I should go out and I did the same thing as anybody else did. I got no special privileges. If we went to work at six, I was expected to be out there to go to work at six, and if we worked late at night I was expected to work late at night. But it was all right, and so therefore we were on equal ground, everybody was, and they knew it, and they could see that I was not getting any special treatment, and they weren't getting none over me, you know what I mean. So it worked out good. I was glad he did that because I was able to put myself on an even keel, I felt.

Maniscalco: That's great. That's really interesting. Now, you know, we kind of talked a little bit about school, but I'm kind of curious—were there any other organizations or extracurricular activities that you were involved in growing up?

Sirles: Really, there weren't that many except in the school I played basketball, softball, the school sports. You have to realize, nobody hardly had cars. There were four of us boys that lived out this way, and after basketball practice every night and we'd walk home, and, you know, you wouldn't today but we always called it riding our thumb, but we always knew somebody that maybe, “Well, he usually come into town,” this older person with a car, “at five o'clock to get something,” so we hustle down there and hope to catch it. Very seldom we had to walk all the way, but everybody knew everybody. And so... But no, during the summer we were fortunate if we even got to go to town once a week.

Maniscalco: Wow, really?

Sirles: And we would take a quarter. GM&O ran the buses at that time; we could stand down here at the road and we could flag down a bus, we could ride from here to Cobden, which is about five miles from here for a dime, we could get into the show for a nickel, we could buy a soda for a nickel and a bag of popcorn for a nickel, so there went our quarter. We could watch a Saturday afternoon matinee or a Saturday night early show, and then we'd try to figure out how to get home, but we didn't have enough money to get home, so we just try to catch a ride. But everybody did it. You know, you never know you're missing anything when everybody is in the same boat that you're in. You know, it's like the old saying: if you never had it, you will never miss it. And everybody had the same problems, you know. But anyway, that's what we planned on a Saturday entertainment.

Maniscalco: (laughter) That's great! What about church?

Sirles: Went to the local church here at Alto Pass, the congregational church, was raised in it. My great-aunt, my two great-aunts were one of the founding members of that church, and it still is a functioning church at that time, but we would go in for Sunday school and church, but again, being out here it was not like being in town or something, you know, it was kind of an effort to go, but we went and was raised in the Protestant faith. And right now, being in small churches, a lot of small churches are having a hard time, and it is to both financially and keeping the membership up. But it was influential into our life, but I would have to say the family was probably the most influence on me, between my mother and my uncle and my grandfather and some of the stories they told, and my mother here, like I say, she's ninety-seven, taught school for thirty-eight years; she still has farmer students to come back and talk to her, but she helped push on to do bigger things and go and tell 'em that they could go on and do things, you know.

And there is—well, which is not very important, but just to give you an example is how things go down... My mother was teaching school and she knows this one girl was not eating lunch that day, and so she said—well, to go back up a little bit, this girl stopped by and asked me if my mother is still alive. She hadn't been back for a long time. I said, “Yeah, she's right there at the house.” She said, “Well I'm a former student.” I said, “Well, go in there. She'll love to see you!” So she went in and she stayed a while and came back in, and then I went in and talked to my mother, and I said, “Who was that?”, and she told me. And she said, “One day, during the Depression in the thirties she wasn't eating lunch, and so she said, ‘Well, Margaret, why aren't you eating lunch today?’ She said, ‘Well, today's not my day,’ and she says, ‘Why do you mean?’ ‘Well, we don't have enough food for both my sister and I, so today my sister's eating lunch, tomorrow I eat lunch.’” So being raised here on the farm, my grandfather, we always had—Grandpa always did say; Mom did, too—they had plenty of food. So she said, “From now on I'll bring you a sandwich; you let your sister eat.” So that happened, and so that was remembered, of course, by this girl, and later she went on and became a professional person and did quite well. But what I'm saying is that again gets back to showing compassion, and this is what I think are these old stories, which are not really interesting to a lot of people, but shows what family is and how deep the roots really run and try to shape people coming on behind us.

Maniscalco: No, that's great. That's really interesting. Wow. You know, it seems like your family has this tradition of telling stories, you know, between the different family members, and you're carrying that on. I'm just curious, was there a certain time when everybody would sit down and you'd hear all these stories?

Sirles: The one rule in our family is we ate every meal together. Now, if we had to go back to work that's fine, but we would come in and basically the table would be set at 5:30. We would eat and we'd go back to work then, but the family ate together.

Maniscalco: Wow, and that was the time when—

Sirles: The time when a lot of things were said and done. Of course, we did other talking that night and stuff like—you know, like I said, there's no TV and there's just a radio—but still yet, it was a cardinal rule we'd sit down to the meal together.

Maniscalco: That's cool. Great. Now, I mean, you've been farming—let's get to farming; that's kind of what we're here to talk about—you've been farming your whole life, and this farm has been here many, many generations. Can you tell us kind of what the farm started out as and what it's kind of changed to over time?

Sirles: First started out as basically growing truck crops, and the biggest two things they grew was rhubarb and asparagus, and sweet potatoes. My grandfather, when he married he married one of the doted horticulturist as far as orchard people daughter, and so at the turn of the 20th century or 1900, basically, when he got married he started growing fruit because of his wife's father told him and explained to him. And so we basically have been growing fruit since then, and of course we raise apples and peaches. We have raised strawberries, we have raised raspberries in the past, and we've done other things, but now we basically are into two or three different... Apples and peaches is our main line, then we do raise squash, zucchini, and yellow squash and cucumbers, and earlier in the year, mainly in June, but from now on, July and August we're in peaches, September and October and November we're in apples.

Maniscalco: Great. And kind of explain—I mean, you have the 800 acres here—can you kind of explain the layout of the farm and if we were to come here and look around what would it look like?

Sirles: Well, we know what areas on the farm where a certain, which is better suited for apples because of the terrain, or peaches, or the soil conditions are whatever we have to have on that. We raise our vegetables on ground. We rotate it, and what we will do is we’ll take out some orchard, and if the ground is suitable we will raise vegetables on it for a couple years to rotate that and try to get rid of some of the diseases that could be in the soil. If we take an orchard out and it’s not suitable to be raised vegetables in, we then lay and turn a cover crop under it for a couple years, just trying to keep the soil up, and also for conservation and for erosion, you know. I know there’s a lot of discussion and pros and cons about farming, but basically most farmers are good conservationists, because if they own the land for very long, like we have, and if you don’t conserve it you will lose it for erosion and everything else, and you have nothing to make your living from. Now, there is different disagreements on how the best to do that, but still yet it’s like 135 years here for us here on this same piece of ground, and we’re still farming it and still making a living out of the land. But it’s not unusual here; there’s some farms out west, out in the east and everywhere else. There’s some in the very East Coast that’s over 250 years old and they’re still making a living out of it, off their land.

Maniscalco: You know, you just mentioned soils, and that reminded me about your college education. What did you go and get your degree in?

Sirles: I got my degree in plant and soil science. I got it mainly, and I got a minor then in biology for the study of—and mainly for that is because of the study for insects, and also I ended up with a minor in chemistry, and this all was related. I knew when I went to college that 90% of the time I was going to come back here, so I honed my degree of courses that I could be elective for this purpose, and mostly so I start mostly in the horticulture and in area, that which interested me that I could use here. And of course, I went and got the for zoology, for the study of insects, and biology for the study of plant growth and all that.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, you said 90% sure that you were going to come back here; what was the other 10%?

Sirles: Well, you never know, you know. You understand, you never say 100% I’m positive of this ‘cause you always got to leave your wiggle room, (laughter) and I even today, I got to leave wiggle room.

Maniscalco: Did you have any other dreams of doing other things other than this?

Sirles: Not really, not really. Farming, any farming is a challenge. A lot of people don’t understand farming, and farming is a lot of aspects you have to have. One, you have to be a very good businessperson. Any time you look at a successful farmer—I don’t care what he’s raising, I don’t care where he’s from—he has to be a very good businessperson. Number two, he has to have the love of the land, because it can be very harsh, and another thing is he has to have, most of ‘em if not all of ‘em have to have an even keel, ‘cause you’re going to have your way ups and your way downs, and most of the time there’s a lot of that you cannot control yourself. The weather, the marketing conditions are something that does that to you. But I don’t know of anything else that I can think of, really, that you go out and you breathe the fresh air, and—to me, I’ll just relate to me—in the spring I can look and see this bloom on this tree, whether it’s an apple tree or a peach tree, and with a little bit of my help, because most of it is Mother

Nature, I can raise this fruit that somebody wants and eats and will enjoy, and, you know... And it sounds corny, I know, but there’s a little bit of love in every one of them, because you’re there, you’re there twenty-four hours a day, you’re right with them, you’re watching them, and it’s just like a little child you see every spring, and so every spring I get pumped up and by fall I’m wore out like (inaudible speech)! (laughter) But you know, it’s just a great feeling, and my son has picked that up, and I hope that he can go on and be, but farming is not an easy life, but I hope it gets better for the future because right now—but then also the input is terrible. Everybody says, “Oh, you’re getting paid for that.” Yeah, but your inputs are very high now. If nothing else, look at your fuel, and fuel affects everybody.

Maniscalco: Yeah. To kind of get back to the farm, we know you have an orchard, we know you’re growing some vegetables... To kind of make it a little easier, let’s kind of divide the two. What sorts of things do you do for the vegetables? I mean, are you using fertilizers, or...?

Sirles: Well, basically, there’s not—we have, and later on you’ll see, we have a packing facility, so therefore we already had basically most of that. A lot of your tractors and stuff can still be used for that, so really there wasn’t that much of a huge investment for us to go to vegetables and we had the land. Had to learn about it more, but the thing is we’re in a business where we use a lot of hand labor, very labor intensive business, very labor intensive. People who we hire that wants to work for us, in the past everybody said, well, it was a common where they’re migrant workers, they just come and go; well, they don’t do that anymore. They come and they stay. They want to know that they’re going to have employment for basically eight or nine months. They may go for two or three months somewhere or back to some family or do something else, but we had to start the vegetable deal because we could get earlier in our picking and raising them in the greenhouses and stuff like that, so we mainly went into the vegetable deal because of the labor situation, because the labor situation, instead of just saying, “Well, I need some help,” and luckily you get some in a week, it doesn’t happen anymore. So most of the people that we have working for us have been with us since March and they’ll stay ‘til December, and then some will draw unemployment. We pay unemployment. Some will draw unemployment. Others want to go back; they’ll have relatives maybe in Florida, Texas, you know, and they say, “I want to go back for a while where it’s warmer than Southern Illinois.” Then some, there are some programs by social agencies that teaches a trade or something different, and some will go to that. But really, the vegetables are set because of a labor situation, but it was not what I would say for us a huge investment. It was an investment but not a huge one, ‘cause we had already set up—we already had the tractors, (clears throat) the equipment that we need to till with and spray with and all that, and pack with.

Maniscalco: Now, I mean, you said you went into vegetables for the labor, and these people are staying here for around ten months; where are they living?

Sirles: Well, we have some facilities here on our place, but 90% of them have bought houses in Alto Pass, Cobden, Anna. They have settled into this area. Most of them are Hispanics. And they have decided to make this community, this area, home, and they have raised their children here. I have a man that’s worked for me for twenty-five years. He’s Hispanic. He married a local girl—to give you an example. He’s probably one of the smartest men that I ever had working for me and one of the best workers I ever had, but he can’t read or write because when he was eight years old his mother died in Mexico and he had three younger brothers, and he became what they call a glass runner. When they make glass in Mexico, they got the big kiln over here to get the glass molten, and then they take it to what they call the blowers. It’s on a

long tube. They blow it and blow bottles. Eight years old, he was running—he was a glass runner from there. But yet, I could ask something about three weeks ago he said, “Yes, you did this, this, this, this, this just exactly.” He had a son—he’s got three sons, but the oldest son graduated last year from high school, exceptionally intelligent. He got a full scholarship to go to SIU for four years, books, housing, everything. And what I’m saying there is—and he’s made a home here—but they are really a big asset to the community, and a lot of people, you know, at the time when they first came in, a lot of people go, “Oh, that’s not good,” but you can understand. And that’s just one example of several in here. And so what I’m staying is most of them decided to make this—and this is a nucleus where enough of the Hispanics that makes them feel like more at home instead of maybe living in a town where there’s only like one or two families or three families. There are several families, and they work in several areas all the way around here.

Maniscalco: That’s great. You mentioned that you have sprayers and things to go out and work with vegetables. What sorts of things do you spray on the vegetables?

Sirles: Well, you have to use fungicides and insecticides. You got fungus diseases and you got insects, and you have to control ‘em. We cannot be organic here because of the weather conditions. We get too much rain. Earlier you mentioned about humidity—we have too much humidity. It’s great for the fungi to grow, your powdery mildews, your scabs, your rust diseases and all that. Of course, your insecticide is to control the insects, and I think all I have to do is ask everybody, “Who doesn’t have Japanese beetles this year?” (laughter) I mean, they have really moved into the area. I don’t know about where you all are from, but they are terrible around this area now. And so that gives you just one insects; there’s several insects we use. We use an integrated pest management program. We work with beneficial insects. We use certain chemicals at certain times. We follow degree days, that is when an insect will be most vulnerable for a spray. We just don’t go out and spray discriminately because that’s not good. Two reasons why it’s not good: it’s not good for the environment as far as that’s concerned; and number two, it’s not very good for our pocketbook, because that stuff is very expensive. So in all there’s about eight to ten insects we really have to watch, and there’s about eight or ten fungus diseases that we have to watch.

Maniscalco: What are some of the real bad insects and the real bad fungus?

Sirles: Well, the first fungus disease is what people will know to us is scab or rust. It just deforms a whole fruit. The worst in the insects is you don’t want a wormy apple or a wormy peach. Wormy apples is a Codling moth and the peach, it’s an Oriental fruit moth, and then you got several others down the line you got to watch that will defoliate your trees and stuff. It’s just like I said, your Japanese beetles. But it’s a science, it’s a science we study. A lot of people don’t understand that you really have to be very careful. A lot of the new insecticides are environmentally friendly but they have a very tiny what we call a slot to work on that insect, and we have to know what (inaudible speech) that insect’s in, or what stage of life it’s in where that will work on.

Maniscalco: Now, you also said something about, you know, releasing good types of insects to battle bad types of insects. What sorts of things—

Sirles: Well, there’s a lot of things that you know of certain time you don’t spray because this, the good insect like a certain kind of beetle that eat mites, you know, they’re more vulnerable to an insecticide. I have even had predator mites, which were good mites to eat bad mites, I had ‘em

shipped in in straws and we’d go around and blow them into trees. There are certain things that you do to try to know how to build up the better part of the insect, the predators onto the bad insects. But again, it’s all a science; it’s not just to say, “Well, today’s Monday, I think I will spray this, this, and this.” No, you know when and what.

Maniscalco: Now, when you were a kid I don’t imagine they had a lot of the things that they have now.

Sirles: They had insecticides and fungicides, but they were not—let me put it this way—they were not as scientific with it at that time. Of course, I grew up and it was the Rachel Carson book, *Silent Spring*. I don’t know if any of you remember what I’m talking about; maybe the younger generation probably doesn’t. But it was brought out about the DDT being used so much it caused the shells of eagles and hawks and stuff having thin shells, and so back then they didn’t know all the consequences. Now they do know some of the consequences, so therefore they’re tailoring a lot of this chemical use to it, but then the more you get into it the more you don’t realize, you realize you don’t know something. And needless to say, within the last month is the salmonella scare. Where did it come from? Nobody really knows. Was it the jalapenos? Was it tomatoes? You know, they say now it’s not tomatoes, but you know. And so I don’t know. My theory on a lot of this food borne illness is the American people or the public—I won’t say the American people—a lot of the public don’t have the immune system that we had when we were growing up ‘cause we didn’t have all the refrigeration and all the freezing and all that. I’m sure we got some of the food borne illnesses and other illnesses that made us sick, and then we got over it and we became immune to some of it, and I’m sure that we were very sick for a while, but, you know, every kid gets sick; that’s the way his parents looked at it, and we didn’t go to the doctor unless it was an emergency. You almost had to break a leg to go to a doctor, and then they think about, “Well, can we wait until tomorrow? We got something else to do.” (laughter) But anyway, that’s the reason on the chemicals previously, but yes, it’s gotten more and more refined.

Maniscalco: Now, you know, to get to the orchards, ‘cause we’re kind of talking about it, you grow numerous types of peaches now?

Sirles: Yeah, about eleven or twelve different varieties?

Maniscalco: Can you kind of explain some of the different, your favorite ones maybe?

Sirles: Well, we start out—any one’s good at the time that you got ‘em, but you start out in the earlier part of the season with your earlier varieties and you stair-step it, and we’re picking now, and we will pick ‘til the first of September. So we will basically have peaches for six weeks. Now, peaches, you just put ‘em in steps ‘cause you don’t want too many at one time, and you just want to get there and there and go on down. So anyway, that’s basically why we raise different varieties, and then also certain varieties will work in our area where they would not work in other areas and vice versa. There are certain varieties that are being raised in Missouri that won’t work in our area ‘cause of the temperature, or South Carolina or Georgia or California. So you have to know which ones work in your area that could make a profit for you, ‘cause that’s the whole idea of the thing, to make a profit. Apples, again, it’s what the different people taste and want to know. The most difficult thing that we have in the fruit business is to decide what to do the American people want? You can set an apple tree a yard, and yeah, you can have apples in a year or two years, but to me to set an apple tree and raise it and to say it’s going to bring me back money, return me money is seven years, so you had to make a decision: what do the American people want to eat in seven years? Do they still want the Golden

Delicious or Red Delicious, or they want the Cameos or the Fujis or the Galas? You know, you’re putting in thousands of dollars before you even pick the first apple. Peaches, it’s four years. So this is not where you can change, whereas with vegetables you can say, “Well, they don’t like this vegetable so next year I’ll set this vegetable.” But that’s the hardest decision in the fruit business.

Maniscalco: Now, seeing as you’re growing a lot of peaches and a lot of apples and everything else, I’m going to imagine you’ve eaten your fair share and you’re quite the connoisseur, so where are the best ones in your opinion?

Sirles: Well, the best peaches basically are usually in the right now to the end of August, ‘cause Mother Nature has the right to put a lot of sugar in ‘em. The longer they’re on the tree the more sugar you get in ‘em. Now, the apples, there’s two theories on apples. One is I personally like a riper apple, but there’s a lot of people like greener, tarter, crunchy apple, and that’s mostly the younger generation. So you raise both, you know. I like a sweeter apple, but the one apple that’s really caught big hold and people talk about and like is the Granny Smith. I don’t care for it personally. But somebody will say to me, “Well, what apple do you think is the best?” I said, “Well, I always got a standard answer to that: Do you like vanilla ice cream or chocolate ice cream?” You know, everybody’s taste is different. So you try to, in our business, we try to meet all things to the people that might want to come in.

Maniscalco: You know, the orchards business is really kind of specialized, you know. What sorts of machinery do you have to have to conduct this business?

Sirles: Well, we have mechanical—our sprayers are not like you see in the corn fields and all that where they spray over the top. We have a fan in the back where ours sprays up into the tree, you know. We have what we call mechanical clippers that we have up, goes up on basically a tall forklift and does a top. We have mobile pruning platforms. They are driven and a person stay in ‘em, and he can move around without coming down, and he stays down until they’re into a cage where he can’t fall, this person can’t, and pruning. And so there’s some, yes, and the biggest expense that you have in orchard business, of course, is your packing facility, and most of the time your refrigeration system that you have to have to preserve your product, because you’re handling a very perishable product. You’re handling a very perishable product. So it’s a specialized, very specialized, you have to be very up on it. It takes kind of a very crazy person to be an orchard grower, to be very honest with you. You have to be nuts!
(laughter)

Maniscalco: Well, can you tell me kind of what’s the cycle of growing a peach? You know, how does it start, where does it—

Sirles: Well, first thing off, you start in the spring. Well, first thing in the spring you prune the tree. Basically you want the tree to get air and have good vigor to grow. You give it a very little shot of fertilizer—not much, we don’t fertilize very heavy at all. We prune ‘em, and then the trees start coming out, and we have to spray, start our spraying schedule for certain diseases, ‘cause they start right when that starts budding out is when the diseases really start. A lot of people will come in here and say, “Well, I got a peach tree now this big, and when do I start spraying it?” Well, you should really start spraying right when the buds start breaking, and then when they bloom you have certain things you watch for, and every section there are certain things you spray and try to take care of. During that time you try to thin ‘em, try to make ‘em large. People like large fruit. And a tree itself will have a tendency—it’s just like anything else—a

tree itself will set on too much fruit, because that’s the way it propagates itself. Now, to get back a true propagation, you go asexual by grafting or budding, but it’s still yet, though, to mother nature, that’s her way of “I’m going to be prolific and then I’m going to sit on a lot of stuff,” a fruit, and therefore the seed will form and they’ll go on. So every stage is just, it would take every week to two weeks we have to go through and spray. Then we mow the orchards. We don’t ever clean cultivate; we keep our grasses, our fescue—we set fescue in these hills—and we keep our grass mowed down, whereas the grass itself will grow good but yet it won’t take the nutrients in the water away from the trees. But it’s a series of things that you just really have to watch, and again, it gets back to like I said earlier, we catch, we have traps that we catch insects in, we see how many we caught in a certain period of time, how hot it was or how cold it was, and et cetera.

Maniscalco: So once you get to a point where you’re spraying and you’re thinning out the peaches off the tree, how long are the peaches then on the tree growing for?

Sirles: Well, we bloomed here April the ninth, and so we’re picking now. We’re picking here the twentieth of July, but we bloom about April the ninth.

Maniscalco: What’s the process for picking?

Sirles: The same way they were picked a hundred years ago: a ladder and a person with two hands with a picking sack around his neck. That hasn’t changed. They’ve tried a lot of mechanical picking that’s still going on, a lot of robots, a lot of that. The American people today still wants no bruising, no marking up, and so they have not perfected that machine yet, and they may in the future.. I hope so, but right now they haven’t perfected it, and so it’s being picked exactly as it were a hundred years ago.

Maniscalco: Now, when a person’s picking for you and they’re putting the fruit in the sack, are they getting paid per bushel that they pick, or—

Sirles: They get paid per sack. They pick ‘em, they come and they put ‘em on a wagon that has a bin on it, and on the sack or the latch the bottom comes out, so therefore they dump the sack. Here on this farm they get a token, and that token is just like money, and then they turn that token in and we count it, and then they get paid for that token, and the token is worth so much money. Now, by state law we have to guarantee ‘em they make the minimum wage. I don’t like a person that can just barely make minimum wage, ‘cause he’s tying up a lot of equipment and stuff. I like the person that actually beats that, and that’s what a lot of people don’t understand. Some of these guys will make \$12-13 an hour, but they got to work very hard for it. But if they pick the fruit right, that’s the kind I want, because I got this much invested in the equipment that that guy making that money as the guy that’s making the minimum wage, but we have here in our business we got to pay minimum wage, we got to pay the Social Security just like everybody, you know, I mean all employers, unemployment, and we have to have workers’ comp, so we’re treated basically the same as all employers. And so at the end of the day we know that if they work eight hours or seven and a half hours how many tokens they need, and if they don’t reach that plateau then we will park it down and say we got to pay the wage.

Maniscalco: Now, when you were a kid it was probably paid the same way.

Sirles: Same way.

Maniscalco: How much was it per sack that person would give to you?

Wayne “Ren” Sirles

ISM_36_SirlesRen

Sirles: Well, when I was a kid the sack was a nickel. Today we’re paying sixty-six cents!

Maniscalco: So I guess it’s gone up a little bit! (laughter)

Sirles: Gone up a little bit.

Maniscalco: Great. Now, in terms of, I mean, you got a lot of land and you have a lot of, you know, peaches and apples and everything; how much are you producing in terms of peaches?

Sirles: Well, we’ve cut down a lot because we kept... First of all, I’m sixty-seven years old, and my wife is sixty-seven; we have one son back in business with us, so therefore it’s not like that it was when it was several families. So we have made a logical decision, we feel, on our part that we brought back down our production and our land, and today we’re basically got about 125-30 acres of peaches and about 90 acres of apples, and we raised about sixty acres of vegetables, and that will vary. Last year we had nothing because we froze out of apples and peaches. We didn’t have a thing because of the weather conditions. This year we have a crop. But we were much larger at one time, and there was more families in it, but since we bought out of the families they wanted to do something else and everything, and so we’re bringing back down our production and we’ll probably keep getting a little bit smaller because she and I are wanting to slow down. I probably will never retire, but I want to slow down a little bit, and so it’s in a transition area for us right now. I think my son loves the fruit growing, and we’ll probably stay fruit growers, but as far as huge commercial wholesalers, which we’re still in right now, that might change because of the economic conditions and everything, and also the availability of how much he can do. You can hire people, there’s nothing wrong with that. You can hire good managers, or you can find them, but it’s very hard not to have that personal touch. I’ve seen it in several, all my lifetime, people say, “I’ll go hire this, that.” It’s difficult to find that very good person without having the compassion that, let’s say, the older has. And I’m not trying to talk badly about managers; it’s hard to find, but those people are very rare, very rare, ‘cause this is not an eight to five job. It’s not Monday, Friday, “Well, I’ll see you Monday morning.” I’ll be very honest with you: I’ll be working all day Saturday, and I’ll work all day Sunday, and then again on Monday morning I’ll be up at 5:30. You know, that’s just the way it goes. And so we basically won’t have another, she and I won’t—I won’t have a day away from this farm ‘til December, you know, but that’s the life I chose. I accepted that.

Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned something that you had a bad crop last year. I mean, that must cut into your income—

Sirles: Oh, it’s terrible!

Maniscalco: And how do you make it through?

Sirles: You save for a rainy day! That’s what I was told when I was a kid this tall there! That’s what was preached to me! You save for a rainy day! That’s just like I told you earlier—you have your highs and your lows in farming. It was pretty low last year, and there wasn’t nothing we could do. We had four nights of freezing weather. It killed everything. You understand what I mean. So it was highs and lows, but ever since I’ve been here it’s been drilled into me, you know, you’re going to have bad years so when you have a good year you put money back, ‘cause sometime you’re going to have to draw it out. That’s what happens. It’s just harder to have a good year than it used to be, and I’m talking... And I don’t know when I was growing up, seemed like we had more or were able to have more good years than we were bad, but I really don’t a lot the economics of the world. When I was younger we used to worry about

Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Michigan. Now you go to the grocery store—Chile, New Zealand, Australia, Argentina. It’s global. You’re in a global market, and this is why I’m saying the way I look at it is I look at the farmers today; that’s why they got to be good businesspeople. It’s changed! It’s changed in my lifetime of raising fruit in forty-five years, basically, when I came back here. And it’s tough. It’s tough.

Maniscalco: You know, you’ve mentioned that you’re in a global market. I mean, what is the market like for a fruit grower?

Sirles: We have no futures. The market is basically set up on a supply and demand. It is a very delicate balance. It’s hard to believe, but you take a city as big as St. Louis or Chicago—I have seen actually one trailer load or two trailer loads of too much of one thing can drive the market down drastically. I see it the other way; if it’s one or two trailer loads short, it can go up. Mainly our market is mainly set by supermarket chains. They keep up on it, they know more, and they were the ones that import the fruit, too. They gotta have a constant supply to satisfy their customers, whether it’s you go in there all the way from avocados to zucchini squash. You know what I mean. They gotta have it there. They know. I got a phone call yesterday from a buyer, and to be very honest with you, I’ve sold enough other stuff now that there’s pressure now on the price of peaches. Then I could tell pretty well by the tone of voice whenever it’s the other way. You know, it’s just something that you learn over the years. It’s something that experience teaches you. But 90% of your market is set by the chain stores, and of course, needless to say, the biggest chain store in the United States is Wal-Mart. The second one is Kroger. There’s basically six, six chain stores in the United States, and they pretty much know how much supply, where they’re coming in and how much and where and what storm has hit a certain area and vice versa, so that’s basically it. Like I said, we have no future, so it’s just a supply and demand. That’s all I can say basically.

Maniscalco: So let’s say a wholesaler wants to buy fruit, and how would they find out to buy it from you, and what do they have to (inaudible speech)?

Sirles: Well, they call. They know I’ve been in business long enough. Or let’s say I don’t have it, I say, “Well, I can’t furnish that today for you but so-and-so can.” Us in the fruit business, we know each other in this area very well, and we all are very fortunate we work together, and in fact I had a fruit grower call me this morning, and he said, “I’m going to need a couple pallets of peaches,” and I said, “Fine.” You know, I just work back and forth. So a lot of it is word of mouth, and then the same ones, and even the chain store buyers will rotate; they got their list that they know who to call in different areas. They call us for fruit and vegetables. They got a guy over in Indiana for melons, down South, even Missouri. You know what I mean.

Maniscalco: Now, in terms of farm labor, and we’ve talked about it a bit, I’m just curious: how many people do you have that help you on the farm?

Sirles: Right now we probably have about eighty on our payroll. During the winter we have about twenty, but of that eighty I’d say thirty-five of ‘em are women, maybe wives of the workers that work for us that are way up on the shed.

Maniscalco: Is there a certain job that a woman would do compared to a man?

Sirles: Not really, but most of the women work in the shed because they have a better eye and dexterity than men. You know, us men kind of like think we’re superior, but we’re not! (laughter) And a woman will have a lighter touch. I had a blind woman once, and with her

delicate of her hand she could tell the soft fruit faster than anybody else, and she would just lay her hands, and fruit would go by, and she was excellent, and that was her job, of course.

Maniscalco: Wow. When you were a child was there a division in, you know, male and female—

Sirles: Well, not really. They were a lot of women that would pick fruit, a lot of women would pack fruit. You know, you have to understand what they did and everything. When I was growing up, the labor force was basically sharecropper people, and most of them came out of Arkansas and Missouri, ‘cause cotton was laid by. Most of the land down in that area was owned by a big land owner, and then he would sharecrop it on so much percentage to that grower, and then the cotton was laid by, and they’d come up here to make money. Well, the cotton pickers did away with them, basically. Then we went into you might call crew leaders that would come in, and most of them would gather up crews in cities, like St. Louis, East St. Louis, Carol Roads, even some (unintelligible mumble), you know, and they would bring ‘em in, and you’d hire that crew leader and that. Then the next step I would say was probably the true migrant that would travel back and forth, and during all this time there were different laws passed that made things a little more difficult and you had to have—and I had nothing against ‘em, it’s just the laws were passed. You had to have housing and all this, which was not right there at the time, whenever I was growing up as a young man, which we have now. And then, like I mentioned earlier, the true migrant is gone and now we have the ones that wants to make basically one move and stay until the end of that time, which was about ten months or nine to ten months, and there are still some that don’t want to work the full year. They like doing something else different. And so that’s where we are now, and if I live long enough I’m sure that will evolve and something different, too.

Maniscalco: You know, we’ve talked—you mentioned just now some of the laws are difficult; you mentioned that you had (inaudible, background noise), and you even said it yourself that it’s very hard to be a farmer. What is it that’s making you get up in the morning and come to work?

Sirles: I told you, you had to be nuts! (laughter) I don’t know, tradition? Challenge? Reward, to see what you can do? Everybody says—before I said I won’t retire, I gotta have a reason to get up out of bed and put my pants on, you know. I can’t... The nature that I can—yeah, I can go and enjoy myself for a while and doing something else different, but I gotta have a purpose. That’s me, and so I guess that’s the reason why.

Maniscalco: That’s great. You know, the family farms, like here are these huge family farms here; there’s not so many of them around anymore. They’re kind of starting to disappear a little bit. How do you feel about that?

Sirles: Well, it’s ‘cause of the economic conditions. It’s very hard to make a living at farming, which I’ve reiterated several times. I’ll give you an example. A few years back I was talking to a very large peach grower in Georgia, very successful peach grower. I asked him about his family; he had two children, a boy and a girl. I said—well, (inaudible mumbling) girl married and moved to Atlanta, and he was about eighty miles south of Atlanta. I said, “Well, I guess your son’s coming back in business.” He said, “Well, you know, I thought so, but,” he said, “there’s one thing about it—I own this peach farm, very successful, and also I own the bank in town, so I gave my son a choice, which does he want, the peach farm or the bank.” You guess which one he took. He took the bank, because air conditioning, not near the hard work, not near the challenge—well, I wouldn’t say challenge, but it’s not... He could more or less control his life.

The job was from eight to so often, and that’s it. So that’s why I’m saying is it takes a very special person, and the family farms are dying, yes. One is economics and two is most of your kids that are raised on a farm is intelligent enough to do some other stuff and go on. I was talking to a human resource person no more than two years ago up here at SIU about—I got some grandchildren—about résumés, and what do they look out? ‘Cause there’s thousands of kids putting out résumés, very intelligent kids. I said, “What do you look at that stands out first to you?” And he says—and he hires for a large company, international, global company—he said, “Number one, I look if that kid comes from a rural area and basically a farm, he said really that’s a big star right there, and the second thing I look for that they belong to the 4H or the FFA.” He says that is the second big star, and he said, “That will move ‘em to the top of my list for interviews,” because he says most of them know how to work and know how to get along with people, and so therefore that moves ‘em up, and I think there is such a demand for certain children that don’t have maybe this deep desire to go back to the farm out there that... And that told me a lot right there, just what he said, because I knew he had to have some criteria somewhere for him to choose which ones to start with.

Maniscalco: Well, with that being said, you know, your grandchildren seem to be—I think I saw a couple of them running around—what are you encouraging them to do?

Sirles: I’m encouraging them to do what they want to do. My daughter, she loves the farm but she didn’t want to be back on the farm. She’s a speech therapist, went on and got her degrees in speech therapy. My son wanted to be on the farm, okay, be happy at that. I think a lot of us that own a business, not only farming but private business, small business assume we want to put the mantle on our children, “You’re going to have to carry this on or you’re going to let down the family name and all that,” and I think you have to be very careful on that, ‘cause if they don’t like it, if they don’t love it, basically, I’m not going to say that they won’t make a success but it’s going to be very hard to make a success of it. So I’m just telling them, “Whatever field you choose, be the best you can be in it.” There’s nothing wrong... You know, I had an aunt that lived to be ninety-four and she died, and she had a saying; she always said, “We had to have doctors in the country and we had to have ditch-diggers in the country,” but she always said, “Be the best at whatever you decide to do,” and I think that’s the whole thing. You decide what you want to do and then you be the best that you can at that and then you’re a success. Just like these men that work for me, picking out there; I respect them because they have not had the opportunities I had, but overall they are about as good in their profession as you can get, and that’s the main thing. A little bit of philosophy there...

Maniscalco: No, that’s great, that’s great! Well, I have one last question for you, and everybody gets asked the same question: This is an oral history interview and it’s going to be kept around for years and years and years, and there could be one day when your grandkids or maybe even your great-grandkids might walk into the Illinois State Museum and say, “Hey look, there’s Grandpa Wayne’s interview, and I wonder what he said,” and this is your opportunity to leave something in this interview for them.

Sirles: I guess I would tell them—basically, when you have one huge purpose in this world, in my opinion, when you come into the world, and we’re all going to leave this world, leave it in a better shape than when you arrived. Leave your footprint on the world in a good way and where you’ll make life better for the ones that come after you. I guess I would tell them that.

Maniscalco: Great, well thank you very much, Wayne.

Wayne "Ren" Sirles

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Sirles: I'm of the old philosophies!

Maniscalco: No, it's great! (laughter)

Sirles: They're going to quit packing at twelve to one. If you want to walking tour you'll have to wait until one, or what do you want to do? Because I saw the time here is ten to twelve.

Unknown Male: Yeah, maybe we could just meet back here at one o'clock?