



## Oral History of Illinois Agriculture

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**Abstract:** Rick Collins was born on July 16, 1972 in Highland, Illinois. Despite not growing up on a farm, he did a lot of farm work as a child and young adult, including milking cows, scraping manure, detasseling corn, and cutting hay. Although he lived in a rural area, Rick commuted to a public school in Peoria and later graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in Forestry. He did not go into farming right away, but now has a small farm with a few acres set aside for organic produce. His main source of income is the restoration of barns and other old buildings, and constructing new timber-framed houses. His passion is restoring old barns. Rick explained the long history of the different types of barns found in Illinois and how many of them had roots in the types of barns found in various regions of Europe. He explained the differences in the roof design and why there aren't any thatched roofs in Illinois. He also explained the hardware and construction methods used by early settlers to build these structures. He dislikes how urban sprawl and bureaucracy have hurt efforts to preserve historic barns, and how many people do not seem to care about the agricultural heritage of the state.

**Keywords:** Highland, IL; Milking Cows; Detasseling Corn; Cutting Hay; Peoria, IL; University of Illinois; Forestry; Organic Produce; Restoration; Timber-Frame Houses; Barns; Hardware; Urban Sprawl; Bureaucracy; Heritage

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## Interview with Rick Collins

ISM\_134\_CollinsRic

Interview: April 10, 2009

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Warren: Okay, we're good to go.

Maniscalco: All right, today is April 10, 2009. We're doing a interview for the Oral History of Illinois Agriculture project. We're sitting here with Rick Collins. How are you doing, Rick?

Collins: Good.

Maniscalco: Great. We'll start out: easy questions; move on to the harder ones. Let's start out with age and date of birth.

Collins: 7-16-72 [1972]

Maniscalco: Okay. And where were you born?

Collins: Highland, Illinois.

Maniscalco: Okay. Could you tell me kind of about your immediate family that you grew up with?

Collins: I have a sister, Teresa, who is seven years younger than myself. And that's it; just her.

Maniscalco: And you grew up with your mother and father there?

Collins: Yeah, my mom and dad, yeah.

Maniscalco: What about your grandparents?

Collins: I have a set of grandparents that are still alive in Toulon, and another set that died when I was really young.

Maniscalco: Were you very close to your grandparents?

Collins: Not at all.

Maniscalco: Really?

Collins: Unh-uh.

Maniscalco: What about other relatives that lived nearby?

Collins: Not many. You know, since both of my parents come from people that immigrated here in 1900; we don't have a lot of relatives. And they—my dad's family came from Chicago and my mom's family came from St. Louis. And they didn't come with a lot of relatives, so I didn't actually have a lot of—I had none, actually. I had no relatives, other than a set of grandparents, within about 200 miles, so—

Maniscalò: Now, you said, you know, your father's parents came from Chicago?

Collins: Um-hm.

Maniscalò: And your mother's parents came from St. Louis?

Collins: Um-hm.

Maniscalò: How did they get to St. Louis and Chicago?

Collins: Well, my dad's grandparents came to Chicago through the Great Lakes. And my mom's grandparents came through St. Louis, up the Mississippi river.

Maniscalò: Oh, wow. Do you know where they originally came from?

Collins: Um-hm. Yeah. My grandfather's—my dad's family, his mom came from Italy, and her husband came from Germany and Ireland. And my mom's mom came from Italy, and my mom's dad came from Germany.

Maniscalò: Great, great. Tell us about, you know, your childhood. What kind of kid were you when you grew up?

Collins: Well, I grew up in a really small town, at the edge of town. And I went to the local grade school and I started working on farms around town when I was about eleven. And from the time, I was about eleven till I was nineteen, I milked cows and put up hay and did a lot of ag-related work, pretty much. That's what I did.

Maniscalò: Now, were you doing that for neighbors?

Collins: Um-hm. Neighbors or— I worked for a custom cutter, too, so we were pretty busy in the summer, putting up hay.

Maniscalò: What kind of pay were you getting?

Collins: When I was eleven, putting up hay, I made two dollars an hour. And when I was sixteen, I made \$5.50 an hour milking cows, which was pretty good.

Maniscalco: Now, that wasn't by hand?

Collins: No, no. It was a DeLaval machine. The guy that I worked for had bought it brand-new in 1972, and he was still using the same system.

Maniscalco: How many cows did you milk?

Collins: Eighty.

Maniscalco: Wow. Milking to any specific type?

Collins: I worked for one guy who had all Holsteins and then I worked for another fella' sort of part-time, as somebody that would fit in when he had somebody that was sick. And he had Milking Shorthorns which were awful and he had a few Holsteins and a few Guernseys and a few Brown Swiss.

Maniscalco: Why were they awful?

Collins: Well, they aren't very smart and they don't come in inline. And they all try to crowd in the same stall and you've got to chase them to get them to go anywhere, unlike Holsteins, who seem to know what they're supposed to do. (laughter) At least, that's my opinion. I couldn't stand them. (laughter)

Maniscalco: So, it sounds like, you know, you didn't grow up exactly on a farm—

Collins: —No, I didn't.

Maniscalco: —But yet, you worked a lot on the farm?

Collins: Yeah, I did.

Maniscalco: So, you know, out of the work that you did on the farms, what was the best chore, what was the worst chore that you did on the farms?

Collins: I enjoyed scraping up the manure at the end of the day in the dairy parlor.

Maniscalco: Really?

Collins: That was my favorite job.

Maniscalco: Why?

Collins: Because it allowed me to think and I could organize things categorically. You know, scrape things into a line; it was very mathematical. And I could relax, and I didn't have to run the milkers. There was no pressure. So, scraping manure was my favorite job.

Maniscalco: What about the worst one?

Collins: I never did enjoy detasseling very much. That was pretty boring. I detasseled a lot.

Maniscalco: Can you explain to me what you had to do to detassel?

Collins: To detassel?

Maniscalco: Yeah.

Collins: Right. So, you either walk the field or you ride in the machine and you pull the tassels out before they tassel. I forget what that's called, that little part, but—you just walk along and pull that out of every four out of every six rows or five rows.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow. So you had to keep track of where you were?

Collins: Well, the—I guess they call them the “bull rows?”—are taller, so you didn't really have to—the female rows are shorter?

Maniscalco: How about cuttin' hay?

Collins: I liked cuttin' hay. I liked doing hay work.

Maniscalco: What was the worst part about it?

Collins: I don't know. I enjoyed all of it.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Well, that's good.

Collins: Yeah.

Maniscalco: That's good. Well, it sounds like you did a lot of work on farms. What about friends?

Collins: Friends? I had a friend, yep. He lived just about a mile away and we spent most of our free time working on cars and trucks and making things in the machine shop. But, yeah, pretty much one friend.

Maniscalco: And did you guys work on farms together then or

Collins: Um-hm. Yeah. His dad actually ran the custom cutter crew. So, we worked on a lot of farms together. We didn't milk together, but we did a lot of hay work together and worked with hogs together and stuff like that.

- Maniscalco: Was that how you got the job on the custom cutter crew—was through your friend? Or—?
- Collins: Yeah, I suppose so. I mean, other than that he was a neighbor who was really close and I was eager to work. Yeah.
- Maniscalco: I mean, you said you worked on cars and stuff like that, but what other kinds of fun things did you do?
- Collins: I was in Boy Scouts. So, that was pretty fun. And I got to be an Eagle Scout, and I was on the wrestling team in high school, so—And I was involved in theater; I did musicals.
- Maniscalco: Very cool.
- Collins: Yeah.
- Maniscalco: Was that kinda the common thing for a lot of the kids in your town, or—?
- Collins: Well, I actually commuted to Peoria. It was a forty minute drive to a Catholic high school in Peoria. So, I went to junior high and grade school in Toulon and then I commuted to Peoria, and—so no, it was totally uncommon, I think.
- Maniscalco: So what was it like, you know, living in this small, rural town and yet going to school in Peoria?
- Collins: It was different. But I think I was young enough at the time that I didn't really notice much, you know? I didn't, I mean—I suppose. I mean, it was totally different, I think, but I—I guess maybe not all that different, really.
- Maniscalco: Do you think the kids at the school in Peoria maybe treated you a little differently because you were from the country or something, or—?
- Collins: Yeah, maybe. Yeah, I mean, I didn't—
- Maniscalco: (unintelligible)
- Collins: Yeah, I didn't really worry about it too much. I didn't spend too much time there and I didn't really socialize with them because it was so far. And I was always working anyway, so I wasn't really in those social circles.
- Maniscalco: Did you drive yourself to school every day, then, or—?
- Collins: I did after I was sixteen.

Maniscalco: So, they had a bus to take you—?

Collins: —No. Fortunately, we had a neighbor who was the secretary at that school and I rode with her. Um-hm.

Maniscalco: Now, why did your parents decide to send you to that school instead of—?

Collins: I think it was probably because my dad felt that there was not enough college preparatory school—classes in our high school.

Maniscalco: Really?

Collins: Um-hm

Maniscalco: Now, was college an important thing for your family?

Collins: It was, yeah. It was huge for my dad. Yep.

Maniscalco: Did he go to college?

Collins: Yep. He and my mom both went to SIU: E.

Maniscalco: What did they get?

Collins: My dad got a degree in geography and a teaching certificate, and my mom got a—I don't know what she got her degree in, but she got a teaching certificate, and so she had been—she still teaches, actually. She's been teaching special ed. for thirty-five years.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow. And how about yourself? Did you end up going to college?

Collins: I did. I went to U of I and I got a bachelor's degree in forestry.

Maniscalco: Wow. What made you decide forestry?

Collins: Well, um—I had originally gone to Eastern Illinois University and I took a botany class there and I really liked botany. And so I transferred to U of I and I wanted to continue—and I had spent all my life outside. So, I think probably just because I wanted to know what the trees were called. And so I got pretty involved in forestry and wood science and interested in that. And so that's probably why I chose that degree.

Maniscalco: Now, you said you were very involved in Boy Scouts?

Collins: Yep.



Maniscalco: Was that a common thing in your town? Was it like—

Collins: —I think so.

Maniscalco: —every guy was involved in Boy Scouts?

Collins: Yeah, we had— there were twenty-three people in my class in Toulon and that was probably pretty much an average class size; twenty to thirty, before this, you know, that was before the consolidations. So, there were about sixteen people in our troop, which is probably a pretty good size for a town of 1,200. So, I—maybe twenty people; twenty boys in the Boy Scout troop. Yeah, I'd say it was fairly common. Yeah.

Maniscalco: What about other, you know, after-school agricultural activities, I mean, or organizations? Was there FFA or 4-H?

Collins: Not for me. I didn't take part in 4-H, and FFA was not a program that was at the school that I was at.

Maniscalco: How about other kids? Did they take part in it?

Collins: Oh, yeah. I think so. Yeah, I think FFA was a big part of my friends that stayed in Toulon, yeah. Yeah.

Maniscalco: What about church for your family? I mean, that seems to be a pretty big thing.

Collins: Yeah. My dad was Roman Catholic and my mom was Lutheran. And so when I was growing up, my dad did like to go to church every Sunday, for the most part. I think religion was a pretty—it may not be so much anymore, but it was a pretty important thing to him at the time.

Maniscalco: You know, it seems like religion can sometimes be more than just going to church. Did your family go to, you know, picnics and other church functions and things?

Collins: No, not really. No. I went to catechism, and—but we moved around from church to church a lot, so I don't know that—

Maniscalco: Why did they move around from church—?

Collins: (Laughter) I think because my dad would get frustrated with the priest and then decide he wanted to go listen to a different priest and—so I think, yeah, that social part of church was not something that I was ever involved in; any of the kinda church functions. And we didn't go to the Catholic Church in our town. We went to the Catholic Church in Kewanee and then in Wyoming.

And when I was a kid we also lived in Minnesota for a couple years, so we went to a couple churches there too, so—

Maniscalò: So you did a lot of work with farming and stuff. You said you did milking; you did some things with hay. How about any other crops or—?

Collins: I never really did much with equipment, you know, like in the fall or the spring. But I would walk beans in the summer and I used to help a neighbor cut silage. So, I would haul his silage wagons into town to get weighed and that's about it. But I never did get involved in any of the row crop production. It was always probably livestock related, hog related, or maybe some beef cows, but mostly dairy cow work and stuff that goes along with running a dairy farm.

Maniscalò: Was that pretty similar to the majority of the farms around the town you grew up in, or—?

Collins: There were two dairy farms—three dairy farms within a twenty-mile radius of Toulon. So, I think that dairy work there was actually fairly uncommon, for the most part. I mean, nobody was milking a couple cows or any of that stuff anymore. It was either both operations had eighty head that they milked every day and the third operation milked forty head a day, so—but not huge and not just a few here and there, either. Um-hm.

Maniscalò: Well, with all the experience you had on farms, why didn't you go into farming?

Collins: Well, I think it's pretty expensive to get involved in farming today. Although I always did want to and we sold our family farm in 1984, I think, in Southern Illinois. So, when I was in college I decided that I did want to get involved in farming. And so now, over time, I've finally come back around to that and we're doing about ten acres of organic—or it hopefully will be organic—crops soon. So, we're going to start with a couple of acres this year, but I've been working towards that at our place a little bit. We grow hay and—but I guess when you say “farming” we think of agribusiness in Illinois when we use those words today. So, I never had an interest in agribusiness or industrial agriculture, but I have always had an interest in small agriculture, and that's what I've been trying to do for the last six or seven years.

Maniscalò: Now, you mentioned that your family had a small farm in southern Illinois?

Collins: Um-hm. Yeah, we had a—my great-grandfather, Jacob, moved to St. Jacob in 1880, and they had a farm there for about 100 years; 1880-1980. It was my mom's dad's dad.

Maniscalò: Wow. And what was that farm like?

Collins: It was at the edge of town and it had a 1920s era Craftsman bungalow and an old farmhouse like this—a variation of a hall and parlor with a summer kitchen. And it had about 100 acres of tillable and a hedgerow. And I don't really know what they grew there actually, other than row crops. I was pretty young.

Maniscalò: So, do you have any childhood stories from being there and playing on the farm, or—?

Collins: Not really. It was pretty far away. I remember eating in the kitchen there and thinking that was fun and that the food was good, but they're pretty vague memories.

Maniscalò: Yeah. So, that was a long time ago, then?

Collins: It was a long time ago and yeah, I would have been eight, ten? Twelve. I would've been twelve when that farm sold and I would have been eight to ten when we probably went there as a kid.

Maniscalò: Now, was it your parents that sold that farm or was it—?

Collins: Yeah. I guess by inheritance. It would have been my mom and her sister had to sell it.

Maniscalò: Hm. That's interesting. Now, let's move on to why we're here, and we're here to talk about barns. Can you tell me how did you get started working on barns and doing barn restoration—?

Collins: Well, I have a friend who calls that particular story—(laughter) like, “classic American gothic” or something. But I did get a degree in forestry, and I was also in the Marine Corps Reserve in Peoria from 1990 to 1996. And I was a combat engineer because that's what that unit is. So, I went to engineering school which is construction school and demolition school. However, I decided in 1995 that I wanted to create value-added products with resources in Illinois. And it bothered me ethically and culturally that the bulk of our timber in Illinois was not being managed properly and that the majority of our timber resources were being exported out of the country.

And so what I wanted to do was create value-added products with Illinois resources. I also was very concerned about the fact that we weren't building buildings here anymore out of materials that were in our radius, in our region. And I started to be thinking about things like footprint, the amount of diesel fuel it takes to do certain kinds of things, and the equation between labor and resources. And these were all sort of ideas rolling around in my head. Essentially, let's take what we have here and use it, and let's use it

responsibly—and let's continue to replant, because I learned then that prior to European expansion, there was about 19 million acres of timber in Illinois and there's about 4.8 right now. And that bothered me. It bothered me because I had grown up in a town that was a bur oak savannah and I had watched as a kid these big 300, 400-year old trees, little chunks of them, get cut down for an extra half-acre or quarter-acre of tillable and that bothered me. I felt like there was something wrong with that.

I wanted to do something about it. I didn't have the skill to do something like that as some sort of legislative or political issue or the background. So, I felt like the thing for me to do was to use what it is that I knew how to do, which was carpentry and construction. So, I started a business that built new timber-frame buildings, and after about three years or so, pretty soon people started asking me to fix old buildings because I knew how to make new buildings out of timber and joinery and stuff like that.

And I also had been very bothered by the fact that when I was seventeen or so—I had been working on hay crews pretty much for five or six years and so this last—when I was seventeen I was working at this dairy farm where I used to milk cows. And I guess, in sort of the hierarchy of hay crews like that—like ours, where we would cut hay not just three times a summer, but every day all summer long because we'd be going around—so there gets to be a bit of a hierarchy and structure to that. And so the best job on that crew is to be the guy that stacks the—or organizes the people stacking hay in the barn, especially in a barn that's like a 6 [6,000] or 12,000-bale barn, where there's a lot of hay and you're putting up a couple of thousand bales a day. You know, it's a pretty large operation, I mean, even by the kind of work that I do today, I suppose.

But anyway, I had always felt guilty because that was the first time I had had that job and six months later the barn burned down (laughter). And it was a beautiful barn. And I think that it was probably an electrical fire and I had always felt guilty that I had stacked the hay too close to the electrical wires. And so part of why I wanted to restore barns specifically, as well as a lot of other things that we do, is because I wanted to make sure that I could, you know, fix that (laughter) problem that I had created, potentially. So, I felt some guilt. And so anyway, so I've spent the last ten years fixing a lot of barns—probably 100—and putting them back up for people. Especially ones that have decayed, stuff like that. So that's why; that's the long story.

Maniscalco: No, that's great, that's great. There are a couple things you said that I want to go back to. And first of all was the fact that you were in the Marine Reserves—

Collins: —Um-hm.

Maniscalco: —here in Illinois? What got you started in doing that?

Collins: My grandfather was a Marine; my mom's dad. And my dad's dad was a Marine, and I don't know. I was seventeen and I thought that that's what you're supposed to do. I think all the male members in the family that I knew had been in the service. I had an uncle that was in the Marines, my dad was in the Army. I had a couple of other uncles in the Army. My dad had nine—eight brothers and sisters, but they had all moved, like, to the four corners of the continent long before I was born, but—but at any rate, I think, I just thought that that's what the next step was. And I decided to join the Marine Corps because I thought it was the hardest one to do, and that's what I was, I guess that's what I wanted to do. (laughter)

Maniscalco: Now, I mean, when you join up in the marines, I'm sure they give you a little bit of an option as to what you're interested in and that sort of stuff?

Collins: Right.

Maniscalco: You know, why did you go into engineering?

Collins: Well, I walked in the recruiter's office and I told him I want the hardest job that they have.

Maniscalco: And that's what the recruiter chose?

Collins: That's the MOS he gave me, based on the fact that that was the closest reserve unit that had that particular MOS.

Maniscalco: So now where were you stationed? I mean, you were in (break in tape) you had to go—

Collins: —Right.

Maniscalco: —to someplace. Where exactly did you—?

Collins: Well, I went to San Diego for boot camp and I went to North Carolina for engineering school. Engineer school, which is—they call it engineering, but it's really just construction. I mean, the term is combat engineering, but it's really digging holes and building forms and stuff like that.

Maniscalco: What are some of the, you know, main things that they taught you there, some of the key concepts, at least?

Collins: Well, I feel like especially with the work we do now, because it's—we've gotten to where we—we put on a lot of community events, we do community service projects every year, and I think with the size of crew that we work

with anyway, probably chain of command and discipline and focus. And I think understanding a chain of command and a hierarchy is pretty important. Structure. The work, I mean, was easier than work I had done as a kid, so I mean, I didn't have to go there to learn how to work. It was more adding structure to things that I thought about. Focus—how to focus your energy.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, the other thing to come back to: the fact that you were talking about this story about stacking the barn. Can you tell us about stacking a barn? What is the technique to it?

Collins: Well, everybody sort of has their opinion.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Well, give us your opinion.

Collins: I think, that probably at that point in time in my life, I had learned to do what I was asked to do, in that regard. So, you know, some people are very adamant that you stack all the bales on edge, so that moisture can wick up through each layer, and that you don't cross them, you know, or stack 'em flat. And some people are very adamant that you stack them flat. I think, in general, some people are also very concerned that they're stacked very neatly. So, I actually enjoyed working for people that liked them to be organized, as opposed to just thrown in the building. But my preference is to stack hay well and tight and stack it flat and stack the first course on edge and to occasionally salt if the moisture content is too high or it's too green or you get into a wet patch in the field. So, I mean, I still do hay every year. We put up hay. And so, I like to stack the first course on edge and alternate the second courses and put a little salt down where it's a little tough.

Maniscalco: Now, you know, you told us this story about this barn that you had stacked and that had burned down and you said you felt some guilt. Can you kinda explain the feelings that you felt when you saw it had burned and at that moment when you saw it?

Collins: Well, I kind of thought, "Oh, shit."

Maniscalco: Really?

Collins: Yeah. (laughter) I was, like, Damn, he's going to be mad at me, but I never really talked to Doug about it. I mean, I went and milked cows for him a couple of years later. Sometimes, when I'd have a week off or a weekend off or something I would go and help him out, but, I mean, I felt pretty guilty because I think that, unfortunately, it was a dairy farm that was right on seventeen [Illinois Route 17] right outside of town; a nice barn, nice old barn. And so I felt pretty bad, because I felt like it was a landmark, you know, essentially. And—yeah, I just—I did. I kinda felt bad about the whole thing, and—I don't think I burned it. (laughter) You know, I don't know. I don't

know. I just—I felt bad. I felt, like, maybe I could have done a better job, you know, or something. Maybe I forgot something; maybe I wasn't paying attention or whatever.

Maniscalò: Well, that—you know, that's a great story on how you got started in doing all the barn work. I would imagine you're probably getting pretty well versed in barns and different types of barns.

Collins: I do, yeah.

Maniscalò: Can you tell us about the different types of barns you've seen in Illinois?

Collins: Oh, wow. We don't have enough tape for that interview.

Maniscalò: (laughter)

Collins: But—

Maniscalò: —You might be surprised. (laughter)

Collins: —Really? Well, I have actually gotten to know quite a bit about barns in the Midwest, in general, and in European history because I think that it's very difficult to discuss barns in general or any kind of ag-related building without understanding the roots of those buildings. So, we can't just talk about them from the standpoint of the last hundred years. We have to understand what's evolved over the last thousand years. And this fall, I went and worked on a farm in England. We did some restoration work on a barn that was built in 1100 and had been used as a barn in agriculture for 800 years, 900 years. And it shut down in 1976. So, we have a wheat barn there that had been in constant use for 850 years. So, that perspective is very important when we think about agriculture in Illinois and I also have traveled fairly extensively in Central Europe and looked at agricultural buildings there and how they're constructed and specifically places like Switzerland, which have very good building museums and southern Germany—very, very good building museums.

So, we can't have a discussion about barns in Illinois without discussing where they came from and there are several types of barns in Illinois. There isn't much left of buildings prior to 1812, because of the earthquake. Most of the wood-frame buildings were knocked down in the earthquake of 1812. So, all we really have to go on in general are barns from about 1820 or so on, 1815, let's say.

There are log barns of multiple origins, especially, like the French Alsace region. There are log barns that isolated Swedes and Finns, built in northern parts of Illinois. There are log barns that Swiss and southern German people built in southern Illinois, especially around Waterloo and Maeystown.

There are isolated stone barns scattered throughout the state. The closest stone barn to here is in Bradford, right off of—I think they call that forty-four now or something. It used to be eighty-eight. Or forty—Route Forty. But, so, there are stone barns, with wooden roofs, barns that—stone barns that held hay stone barns that held wheat, stone barns that held oat. There are stone buildings built by the British around 1800. There are five of them; they go from St. Louis south to like, Cape Girardeau that probably held some kind of produce, staple food type things. All those things are barns.

There are barns built by immigrants from the 1830s and 1840s who were not of New England descent, so there are barns that are very, very specific to Europeans and the culture that they brought with them. And then there are the New England barns, which are predominantly what we see around. Illinois was described in the—I forget what it was called; I think before it was called the “prairie farmer,” they called it something else. But the New Englanders were really down on Illinois and Iowa in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s, because the farmers here weren’t building any barns. The majority of barns that we see in the countryside today are from the 1870s to the 1890s, and they are, in general, built by either second generation immigrant families or predominantly people who immigrated from New England or Pennsylvania or New York. This barn was built by an immigrant from Connecticut. Lots of the big, fancy buildings that we work on are built by New Englanders who came to Illinois with money and a plan and bought land. We also work on some buildings that were built by English immigrants, who came from England specifically to show different breeds of cattle—gentleman farmer buildings, carriage houses. The 1870-1880s period.

So, if we sort of back it up a little bit, you have buildings that date from very early immigration—late 1700s to the early 1800s—that are pretty rare. You have buildings that date from around 1815 to 1840, also very early immigrant buildings, some built by New Englanders, some built by Appalachian settlers who came up at that point in time as well. Very distinct building types; very distinct joinery used in them. But in general, what people—how they categorize these things is they say that, in general, wheat and threshing-type barns were in use from about 1820 to 1850. You know, we had the wheat blight, which knocked out wheat production in Illinois. With the wheat blight came the shift in agriculture to livestock production. So, then you have essentially big hay barns and along with hay barns came what is known to be the three-portal barn, which is a feeder barn. So, we have hay barns, feeder barns, and threshing barns, as well as, later on, into the late 1800s, early 1900s, especially the period from about 1900 to 1920, we have the big dairy barns. And then it all sort of starts to change again. We start to get into what are called the Gothic barns, which are the barns that are laminated chord members.



And from there you break down each group into construction style, whether it's timber-frame and if it's timber-frame, whether it's hewn or sawn. If it's balloon construction; If it's plank construction; if it's plank truss construction; if it's stacked plank construction, which a lot of dairy barns and small dairy facilities were because of the insulation value, as well as most of the early jails in Illinois. Log, crib log, garrison log, and then of the log, there are four different notching styles. There's a lot to barns in Illinois.

As I understand it, there were around 350,000 timber barns in Illinois at the turn of the 1900s. Right now, there are about 35,000. And I've spent a lot of time calculating how long it takes to build a barn by hand—for example, how many man-hours. It's a very critical part of our mission statement and what it is that we do that people understand that buildings should be salvaged. Regardless of what they think the input values are today, if we throw them away we lose the input values of the past. So—

Maniscalco: So how many man hours have you figured for the average barn?

Collins: Well, let's take an 1840s threshing barn. Typical threshing barns are built using what's called sacred geometry or ratio geometry, which means that your average threshing barn in Illinois is one rod tall. A rod was the unit of measure that surveyors used to lay out farmland. It's an easy measuring tool: it's sixteen feet, six inches. So, if you use ratio geometry to build a building, then it's approximately thirty-three feet wide. The hypotenuse of the floor plan is a one-to-two relationship with the gable wall length, which puts the barn at around forty-something—forty-two to forty-eight. Many early threshing barns—and this is why we picked this particular building, is because most of those early threshing barns were hewn, Okay?

So, if you use that geometry, which, when laying out barn plans— I'll just, clarify that a little bit. There is a shift around 1850 to 1860 from laying buildings out using the geometry of our ancestors, which lasted from Minoan Crete until about 1850, to what became more of a progressive way of laying it out; saying, "I'd like a grain bin over here that's fourteen by fourteen, because I want to put X amount of bushels in it," instead of saying, "I'm going to lay this barn out based on the geometry that I know and understand." Or, "I'm going to build a barn that's 100 feet long and sixty feet wide because I need to put eighty cows in there on that end, in the wintertime, to feed them," or whatever.

So anyway, we picked threshing barns because they used the geometry that carpenters used for millennia. And we also pick them because they're hewn, and so hewn buildings take longer, and hewn buildings are the buildings that we generally try to save for the most part, because they have so many input values.

But to answer your question, an average threshing barn like that has about 12,000 board feet in the frame, Okay? So, 12,000 board feet in the frame takes me about 600 man-hours in the shop. So, if you wanted me to reproduce that barn from 1840, I could do it in 600 man-hours. If you want me to reproduce that building using original techniques, which is something that we often do, including felling the timber, hewing the timber, cutting the joinery, raising the pieces, raising the bents, installing the rafters, not including the siding and the shingles, fascia, or the gutter, or the doors, that 600 hours becomes about 4,000 hours; a big difference. Maybe 5,000 hours, depending on how far you have to go with the material. It generally takes four to five times longer to cut the joinery, for example. An eight-by-eight, which is what a lot of early barns are or even a twelve-by-twelve, it's sixteen feet long, takes me about six hours to hew out that one piece. Or thirty minutes to cut on our sawmill. These are the kind of relationships that we talk about when we talk about restoring buildings and saving buildings, and why it's important to save buildings.

Maniscalco: You know, it's very obvious just by the numbers that you've given us, that there is a lot of thought that has gone into the barns that were made in the past.

Collins: Absolutely.

Maniscalco: And thought in different terms. You know, I'm hoping that you can kind of describe to me the different types of barns and the thought that went into them, if you can do that, maybe, you know, if there is a style of barn, this style of barn was used for—

Collins: Well, three- and four-bay barns prior to 1850 always have a threshing bay and they always have a place to store the sheaves, and they almost always have a place to store hay. It's not unusual for early barns prior to 1850 to have some place to bring animals in to take care of them or feed them. Although, in Europe, what we know is that up until that time period that was not the case. You did not bring an animal in a barn that stored food. You were kind of looked down upon. I think what we found here is that those traditional values existed, but people, due to circumstance, had to adapt. And so, what we see are typical European-style threshing barns with some place in them for livestock, whether it's a horse or an ox or a couple of cows or something like that. They may not have spent the night in there all the time, but they were able to bring them in there and feed them or milk them.

So, early barns up until 1850 were multifunction, not single use as the floor plan intended them to be. So, they were for threshing oats or wheat or barley, hay storage, and livestock care, animal husbandry. Often, these threshing barns within a few years were turned into bank barns. And bank barns are simply barns that are built into the side of a hill, and they have a floor underneath, and generally people use the floor underneath for livestock again. So, livestock downstairs, food upstairs, is one way to think about it. And, in

general, hay barns have been oriented in a direction where the doors generate cross-flow for threshing. So, they are oriented so that one door faces the east and one door faces the west.

That's the predominant barn style of Illinois up until the 1850s; is this multifunction threshing barn. I have ran across a few examples of European-style barns that are long with various compartments in them, essentially under one roof. They may have a dog trot through the middle to separate them. But they are set up in a way that European farms were set up, so that horses, some cows, some pigs, some chickens, a little blacksmithy, a little carpentry shop, a little livery place, well, granary, hay, all throughout. And those are pretty rare. There aren't very many of those. We restored one in Collinsville last summer as a community service project. It was a ninety foot-long barn.

After the 1850s and 1860s, farmers started to get a lot of pressure from other farmers—especially from New Englanders and stuff like that—to build bigger buildings and to house their animals. And the climate here was different than the New Englanders had had in their own background—and Europeans, the European climate is a lot milder; New England's climate is a lot milder in the sense that they don't get the swift up and down temperatures. They don't get the freezing rain that we get, they don't get a lot of things that make it harder for us to have cattle outside and animals outside than they do. So, farmers started to realize that they needed to do more for their animals, and so they started to build things like feeder barns and hay barns. And with the shift in agriculture due to things like the wheat blight, which spread pretty quickly through Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, people started to go into corn production and livestock production. So, we start to see really, really big hay barns, or really small hay barns and we start to see feeder barns. And those are the two predominant styles in the late 1800s, floor plans.

Now, certainly along with all of that are dairying operations, and dairying operations from the 1860s on have sort of been notorious for trying to be the—and notorious, I don't mean in a negative way, but just, dairying operations have been the example by which progressive agriculture has moved throughout the late 1800s. So, we see the round barn, the octagonal barn, the thirteen-sided barn, the twenty-sided barn, the seventeen-sided barn—because people were trying to figure out better ways to keep animals inside, better ways to store hay inside, because the hay barracks that were used in New England and in Europe didn't work in our climate. And so hay would rot, and so we needed to get hay indoors. So, we see dairy barns probably as sort of a third type, whereas prior to that, people with dairying operations were simply adapting what's been come to be known as the three-bay English threshing barn, which has been around for about 700 years, that floor plan.

Maniscalco: Wow. You know, you've tied a lot of these barns back to English history and European history. And I'm wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about, you know, roofing materials for barns.

Collins: Sure.

Maniscalco: You know, in Europe, I'm sure they used thatched roofs.

Collins: Yeah. Thatched roofs have to be on sixty degrees or greater, and most barns of Europe are built using the daisy wheel, as the method by which construction occurs. And so, those buildings are known as full pitch buildings. In general, the daisy wheel fits in the gable end of the building. That's where the steep roof comes from. That's a sixty-degree roof, or an equilateral triangle.

In the Midwest, we see some very, very limited examples of thatch. But in general, most of the roofs in the Midwest are what are known as one-third pitch or half pitch roofs: either twenty-two and a half degrees, twenty-seven degrees, or forty-five degrees. None of those work for thatch. So, early roofs—early, early roofs, like let's say 1760 to about—1820, in areas that were not serviced by a river that could get materials from the east, where there were shingle mills, are going to be hand-hewn or hand-riven oak shingles. And we see them in lengths from eight inches of reveal up to about fourteen or sixteen inches of reveal. And generally, they're hand split out of butt logs of big oak trees. Once they started to log Michigan in 1837 and they started to put the first sawmills in there, through Chicago (break in tape) began to see pine shingles flowing into the state. Pine shingles don't last very long.

We see a repetitive cycle of predominantly wood roofs throughout Illinois, except in cases where somebody took the effort to spend the extra money on a steel—like a standing seam roof. We see a few slate roofs, but slate has to be imported. So, essentially, up until probably the beginning of the Civil War—well, not really; fifteen years before the beginning of the Civil War—we see buildings that are built predominantly out of local materials, which means white oak; cleft shingles they're also known as. And we know that, because of the spacing of the purlins on the original buildings. They tell us the spacing for the shingle. And I've also found the remnants. The barn that we're working on here was built in approximately the 1870s, and it has pine shingles on it.

They started to log Wisconsin in the 1840s and 1850s, although not as extensively as they did Michigan, and we started to see small, isolated shingle mills in the Quad Cities and up the Mississippi River Valley. So, oak shingles, then pine shingles, and then eventually western red cedar shingles as we started to buy products from British Columbia and the west, like Oregon and Washington, around 1890, 1895, 1900, we started to see western red cedar. So, wood of two types: slate; very rare, thatch; probably almost nonexistent.

Maniscalco: What—in your opinion now, of course, we’re speculating, but why do you think immigrants that had always known thatch roofs in Europe came here and said, “Oh, we can’t do that. We’re going to do wood instead?” What do you think it is about thatch that didn’t work for them?

Collins: Well—a steeper roof takes longer to build. That’s one theory. It takes more material. You also have to put a crop in, in order to harvest thatch. And it’s actually pretty hard right now to get good thatch. In fact, the thatch that they use in England—I don’t know the name of it, but it’s a grass. It’s not like oats or—it’s not straw. It’s not straw like we would think about it. You can use straw, but it doesn’t last very long, and I don’t remember what that grass is called. So, I would suspect probably it had more to do with the fact that you would have to put the crop in and then harvest the crop, when what you really needed was a roof.

And we see often that even New Englanders, New England immigrants, Appalachian immigrants, New World immigrants, they pretty much all came to here when they pioneered it, and generally, except for very rare cases where they might have been a carpenter in the group, they generally built cabins. So there is some pretty established geometry for cabins in America, and when people settled at that point in time, they did have a plan about what it is that they were going to do, and there were a lot of publications for what kind of things people should build when they pioneered in this new place. It wasn’t an unknown; they didn’t go there and think, “Hmm, how tall should I make this building?” No. All that stuff was all in a book already. And so, the third reason would probably be, because it was already all planned out. They didn’t have to invent it.

We see some cases of buildings throughout the Midwest where the folks who came brought their tradition with them, and it’s likely because they brought a carpenter with them. We have to remember that quite often the people that settled here weren’t carpenters and that in general—and there’s been quite a bit of discussion about why we lack skilled trades in America today, and why we’ve always lacked skilled trades. When you look at the manifest for the *Mayflower*, the tradespeople on it are all listed as apprentices. And that’s been the case for a lot of American history. The masters didn’t leave—they didn’t need to—but the apprentices did.

So, what we have in the trades, in building especially, in places that are settled throughout the United States are either non-builders or apprentices building buildings, using plans that were given to them. William Paine was a prolific writer from the late 1700s who wrote things like *The House Carpenter’s Assistant*; published these kinds of books that laid out how to build these buildings. He was the last one to lay out, in a publication, a building that was of European proportion. That was 1797. So, if we look at the fact that the

majority of the buildings left here are from the 1830s and 1840s, we have almost thirty or forty years of history that occurred in which American writers were trying to help settlers come up with quick buildings to build.

So, I think there's multiple reasons for why they did not choose to do that, but the fact that they'd have to put a crop in to produce it is one, the fact that there was an established system that they could buy into, two, and number three, sixty-degree buildings require longer rafters. It's farther up to go. Number four: we don't have skilled trades. Which is why I think I've found that many of the buildings are laid out using the rod as the basic measuring device, because that's the type of tool that anybody would have who was going to go and settle. You have to know how far it is to the end of your fence rail: sixteen foot, six inches. Everything was sold in rods.

Maniscalò: Interesting. Now that we've talked about the roof, what about the siding?

Collins: Right. Well—

Maniscalò: —You mentioned a couple different types of sidings, and—

Collins: Yeah. Well, the reason that people build log buildings or a reason that people built log buildings in the Midwest, in general, is because they did not have a siding material. So, if you're going to make siding, you have a couple of options. You can make siding in six- to eight-foot lengths, and you can rive them out of an oak log. It's pretty labor intensive, but it works. That would be a clapboard-type siding. We see some riven clapboard-type siding, but you wouldn't want to put it around a thirty-by-forty barn, probably. Way too labor intensive. Small buildings, trades buildings. Probably. So riven oak clapboard siding is one, but—

Maniscalò: What do you get from a siding like that?

Collins: What do you get?

Maniscalò: Yeah, like, what are the benefits from it?

Collins: Well, I think that, you know, it's pretty well understood that riven clapboard oak siding is probably some of the best siding in the world, and you probably can get a 200-year life out of it. That's a benefit. The other benefit is that you don't have to go anywhere to go and get it. You can make it right there. You have to have a little bit of knowledge; you have to know how to build a siding break. But it can be done. A twelve-year old boy can do it. A couple of boys could probably make enough siding for a house in a couple weeks. I've made it. It doesn't take all that terribly long. It takes about fifteen or twenty minutes to cleave one out, cleave out a siding board. But it's labor intensive. That's the downside.

So, you have riven siding or you have log with infill. Once people started to build barns around the 1830s or 1840s, sawmills became much more common; water-powered mills became much more common, all throughout the Midwest. And so, what we started to see, generally speaking, are random width pine siding boards from that time period. It's not—it is unusual to see oak or walnut or other hard woods as a sawn siding material. It's not that they couldn't have done that; it's probably that they would have chosen not to, unless they had a sawmill on their property. But predominantly, what we see on the earliest barns that are left here are random width pine boards, probably from Michigan. And they are generally eight to thirty inches in width.

Maniscalò: Why are they random?

Collins: I think probably because the early mills—my guess would be communication, you know. When you—the butt logs that they were sawing in Michigan and Wisconsin were about five to eight feet in diameter. So, when you're milling something up on a fairly simple mill like that, you're going to slab off siding boards. And I think that it has more to do with the fact that the industry wasn't organized, and that as you're making timber or cants out of the centers of these, you're just milling off these siding boards and you're stacking them up on either side of the mill, and then you're selling what it is that you have. And after the 1850s, 1860s, that industry became more organized, and they started to say, "OK, we're going to make all one-by-tens, and we're going to sell them to Chicago, and Chicago is going to sell them to Quincy, and we're going to send them by rail down to Quincy" or something like that. Or they're going to come down the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi.

So, after the 1860s, we start to see much more uniformity in material, and it probably has everything to do with organization. From about 1850 until 1890, they logged 3 billion board feet out of the Midwest annually, which is the current lumber production of all of British Columbia today, in soft wood lumber production. So, heavy, heavy timber coming out of here. Fifty percent of it was going back East to build the cities, and 50 percent of it was going this way.

Maniscalò: Are there any other types of siding?

Collins: Well, that's a board and battens siding, random width board and batten siding. Later on, into sort of the Victorian period, we see saw and clapboard siding on fancier barns or gentleman's barns. But no. It's either board and batten or log. I think I've read and seen some things about, you know, some—especially, there was a tradition in the Appalachians to use bark as siding, although we didn't really have the right trees here for that. Bark doesn't slough off the species that are common to Illinois like it sloughs off things like yellow

poplar, which grow in the Appalachians. So, you know, we might have seen some isolated bark siding, but it's all gone, I think. You read about it.

Maniscalò: What about the framework, the timber frames inside? I mean, are there different types of framework that—?

Collins: Well, certainly culturally, I think people brought their tradition with them. You know, by the eighteen—and I always kinda go back to the 1840s, because that's really the last group of barns, the oldest group of barns that we have left. But by the 1840s, you know, American culture had pretty well defined the shape of the building. And so, what you find are—is the classic, as I said, English three-bay threshing barn, which was adopted by everybody. Although, as you travel throughout the Midwest, you find different types of joinery and different types of bracing in buildings. And I think predominantly, you can link that to a Central European influence. Most of the barns that vary much from the American theme that are left around here have some sort of Central European influence in them. There's a few that have an English influence in them, especially in the orientation of the material or the type of bracing, but not English roof styles, and not Central European roof styles—just carried into the framework only.

Maniscalò: Interesting. What about, you know, you've mentioned a couple of times different types of joining. Can you explain what they are, and—?

Collins: Well, the scarf joint is probably the most commonly used joint as a signature joint.

Maniscalò: What would it look like?

Collins: There are 400 different styles of scarf joints in the world. And there's probably a dozen that are used in Illinois. There's about 100 that most trade carpenters would have in their repertoire. But essentially, some kind of clasp joint, some kind of joint that allows us to make a piece of wood longer. And I certainly think that, as I stated before, the fact that we did not have tradespeople coming here, we don't see as much signature work as we might. It's all pretty American. There are plenty of barns around, though—I shouldn't say “plenty”—there are a few barns around that clearly show European master carpenter influence, such as this one, but follow an American theme, even.

The other thing that people found, of course, in this country, as they'd found in America and continue to find today, is the fact that they had really long, straight timber. So, they didn't need the kind of joinery that they were using before, and they didn't need to do some of the things that they had done before. So, American building styles from that time period are adapted to the type of timber that was present as well, the fact that it was long and straight,



and easy to work. So, some of those things that are signatures of various regions are part of the fact that for the last—well, I mean, in European history in general, but, you know, there had been serious wood shortages throughout Europe for hundreds and hundreds of years, so a lot of the buildings took on very regional differences because of the type of material that they were using. They didn't have that problem here, so I think some of those things might have gone away, too.

Maniscalco: What about, you know, what are the—what are some of the things you're finding that have been used to hold different boards together, different timbers together? Are you using pegs? Are you using nails?

Collins: Well, timber frames in general are held together with pegs, or trunnels, or treenails, and, in general, most of the barns built prior to 1860 are built using a technique called draw boring, which is a one-sixteenth offset in the peg hole, which allows the building to be pulled together when you drive the peg in it. After 1860 or 1870, people started to give up the draw bore and just go to plain drilling the hole and sticking a peg in it. Draw boring is sort of an old technique, and one that works really well, and certainly one that comes from a carpenter. You would not know that unless you had been taught that. You could see somebody putting a building together, but you wouldn't know that—So, that's the type of, you know, that like other types of wood—other things that are known as, like, secret joinery, trade secrets—stuff like that. So, basically, two styles of pegging: either pegging or use of trunnels with draw boring.

Cut nails were pretty common from around 1840, 1850 on. Lath nails; sheathing nails; siding nails—machine-cut nails. Forged nails and forged spikes are generally used for fastening larger pieces of wood on, often doors or ledgers or lintels in buildings, where you have to hold a really beefy piece of wood onto something. But, in general, what we find is that almost all buildings from the 1840s to 1900s are built using machine-cut nails. And I think there are thirty different kinds of machine-cut nails. Sometimes people call the wrought nails, rose head nails because of the way—or not rose head nails, but pyramid head nails because of the shape the nail header takes on when you make them in a blacksmith shop.

So, we have pegs or trunnels, two categories, we have machine-cut nails, and we have smithy-made spikes and nails. And then we have smithy-made hardware, which generally include pintle hinges and pintle straps. I think that the blake [thumb-latch] handle was patented in 1842, and the blake [thumb-latch] style—I think it's blake [thumb-latch] style—handle was made from around 1840 to 1920. And that's predominantly what we see on every cellar door in Illinois, and every—

Maniscalco: What does it look like?

Collins: It's about this tall, and it has three little shapes on the top, three little shapes on the bottom, and you push this button and it lifts up a latch on the backside. Those are made in factories. And so we have factory-made hardware like the blake-style handles, and so you see those on granary doors. You also have factory-made—what we call today—cremone bolts, to hold doors shut, which are bolts that go down through the door. They're held by a rod. You also have smithy-made bolts, door bolts or cremone bolts; very characteristic of the kind of stuff you see all throughout the United States for the last couple hundred years. In very early buildings—and even up until the 1860s or seventies—if somebody hired a smithy—like once again, a tradesperson—to do the work, you might have Norfolk or Suffolk-style handles, which are what people today might call colonial hardware. It doesn't really have anything to do with the British colonies; it's just the hardware that everybody used. And they usually have what's known as a bean-type handle. We also see smithy-made screws and machine-made screws.

In very early buildings, in what people might call primitive buildings—which I wouldn't call primitive; just because they're made out of log doesn't mean that they're primitive. But occasionally you find a fair bit of wooden hardware: wooden door handles. This particular barn that we're working on here from 1867 has a couple of wooden door handles. Wooden door handles are made in two ways: they're either carved, or they're taken from what's known as a “found piece,” which means that it's a shape that occurs in nature and you fasten it to the building. You find a fair bit of leather: leather straps, leather hinges on windows and doors, bins, bin tops, wooden latches, wooden Suffolk-style latches; pretty extensive use of stuff. But you can boil all that kind of stuff down into either machine-made or site-made, or smithy-made, and then whether it's wood, wrought metal or stamped metal or cast.

Maniscalco: Now, every kid and every person, probably when you say, “barn,” they think of this bright red big building. Why red?

Collins: Well, I think it has to do with the iron oxide pigment that people had pretty readily available, as paint. And actually, color is not something that I've done a lot of research on. But what I've been told is that—or what I gather is that it has everything to do with the fact that iron oxide was a pretty common pigment color for paint, for lead-based paints.

Maniscalco: Now, I mean, you have a lot of experience with barns. What are some of your other experiences with other common colors for barns in Illinois?

Collins: Well, certainly, initially, barns weren't painted. And I think that—I can't even think of one building I've ever seen that wasn't red at some point in time, (laughter) actually. I mean, it's not uncommon for the first twenty or thirty or forty years of a barn's life to be unpainted. A barn built in 1840

might not have got painted until 1860 or 1870. So, I think in the past, I see more unpainted buildings, unpainted siding, than we do painted.

Maniscalco: Why do you think it was such a long time before they would—?

Collins: Well, there's no tradition for it. Painting is new. The concept of painting an entire building is new. What's more traditional for our collective past is some sort of infill system in the wall that's lime washed. So lime and something like chalk as a pigment or something like that. Or milk, or milk paint, milk-type paint, which is pretty old stuff. So (break in audio) painting in this area wasn't something that was really evolved until the 1860s and 1870s, and really didn't hit its heyday until the end of the 1870s, when there became a lot of competition between farmers and landowners to have a pretty barn, and a nice barn, and a big barn, and *Prairie Farmer* was showing all these pictures of big, brightly-painted barns on the front of the magazine. So, I think culturally, we didn't have that in our past until we could afford it, or the technology came around in such a way that we could mass produce it.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. And you kinda led me onto the next thing, which is barns are a part of our culture now. And there's even associations and organizations out there like the Illinois Barn Alliance. Can you talk to me a little bit about that sort of stuff, and how they still maintain that place?

Collins: Well, the National Barn Alliance is probably one of the more active ones. Charles—I forgot his last name [Leik]—is the president of the National Barn Alliance. He's really interested in lobbying in D.C. and trying to change the way the tax structure works, and support the salvage of these buildings by giving people the incentive. So, I think that what we see are lobbying organizations like that. We see groups like the Illinois Barn Alliance that are very, very new that are not very well funded, and they don't know exactly what to do in a state that does not support its rural heritage in that way, like, lots of other states do. Like every other state that surrounds us, perhaps, except Missouri all have much more progressive legislation and support of our agricultural heritage in the form of buildings. So, I think that that's what the Illinois Barn Alliance's goal is to do. And you have other groups like Silos and Smokestacks that are very good at finding funding, and cross between—and encompass the whole thing, not just barns but mills, gristmills, sawmills, silos, factories related to agriculture, whether it's blacksmith shops or livery shops—stuff like that. So I think there's three groups: we have interested groups that are trying to do things at a grassroots level, we have groups that are trying to do things at a level that lobbies them with our legislators, and we have groups that are very involved in grant funding and doing all sorts of things with all buildings related to agriculture.

Maniscalco: What about, you know,—we're getting a little bit more into the preservation side of things, but, you know, what about working on a rural project compared

to an urban project? You know, some of these barns are just being overtaken by urban sprawl and things. Is it more difficult to work in that environment, or—?

Collins: Well, I think that there's probably two answers to that question and one is where there's heavy unionization—the Carpenters Union was founded in 1893 in Chicago, and it's a real problem for us as far as salvaging these buildings go, especially in urban areas, especially given that Chicago has—what?—85 percent of the population of the state, or 90 percent of the population. So when we go to these areas where there's a lot of urban sprawl, oftentimes they're losing buildings because the Carpenters Union won't let somebody in there to do the work, yet they don't have people that are trained to do the work. And so, we lose a big portion, you know, we lose a big portion of our heritage in that way because either they mock up something that's completely false, they don't do the restoration or the repairs in the correct way, or they allow it to go away because they don't want to take it on and they won't let anybody else in there to do it.

So, Chicago is a huge problem in that regard. And the urban sprawl that's occurring in Chicago is at a rate that's got to be completely unprecedented, at least in the last ten years. And I spend a lot of my time in Chicago working with Forest Preserves, Park Districts, residents, philanthropists, living history museums. And, in general, the attitude of folks in the areas of urban sprawl is that they don't value those buildings or those icons of our heritage, and so that there's no way to save them. The Teeple barn, which blew down a couple of years ago, is a good example of this in St. Charles, where you have a community that's got a high tax base and *is* very wealthy, yet they can't salvage the only thirteen-sided barn in Illinois. Yet you have Forest Preserves, like Will County, who have been fairly progressive with saving buildings, yet they can't get the funding together to do it and as urban sprawl—we actually enter into another issue with salvaging buildings, because as urban sprawl takes over—and really, when we talk about urban sprawl I think in Illinois in general, we're talking about places like Chicago—those areas of land end up being set aside as green spaces or agricultural areas get taken over by the Forest Preserve. Well, when you involve a county agency like that, what was once a 100,000 dollar project now becomes a 300,000 dollar project. So, now we lose buildings because the agency in fact itself prevents us from saving them, because it can't be afforded to be done because of prevailing wage, for one, or all the other things that we have to add to our bids, like bonding, or stretched-out timelines, the union rates. It's a pretty complicated thing. What was once a pretty simple thing, a three or 400,000 dollar restoration, all of a sudden becomes an 800,000-dollar restoration, and it becomes a very hard thing to sell. And now I've forgotten what your original question was. Urban sprawl?

Maniscalco: Yeah, about urban projects versus rural projects.

Collins: Right. So I think it's hard. And I think that the other place that we run into that is on university campuses. For some reason, the University of Illinois has decided that the South Farms are not important to them anymore, and so they are systematically—and have been systematically, for the last 15 years—taking down one building after another. And we don't find this in other university campuses. Other university campuses in the Big Ten sort of celebrate their agricultural heritage.

That's a difficult climate to work in as well. We dismantled the beef barn at U of I, and working in those kind of urban environments is hard because it's more expensive. And while we're trying to do something fairly—I mean, essentially, the U of I was like, "Well, we don't need the beef barn—we'll just demolish it." Somebody says, "No, you shouldn't demolish it—you should give it away." So anyway, we get hired to move it, but yet, we have to deal with the cost of dealing with the people that protest that or something, because it's hard to do. It's easier to work in a rural environment.

And then, of course, in the Chicago area, in Rockford and in Bloomington, you have to deal with code, which is a major problem because once again, it escalates the cost. What has worked for several hundred years or several thousand years now, in the eyes of code officials, doesn't work anymore. And we have to do things like put in different kinds of staircases, and different size of window and door openings, and all these kinds of things; all that drives the cost up. So, essentially, what urban sprawl does is it takes these things and drives the cost way up, which makes it very hard to save them.

Maniscalco: How do you deal with an inspector who's coming in and looking at a project that you've done that's historically accurate, like you just said? I mean, how do you deal with such a situation?

Collins: Well, we have to have taken care of that before he shows up. And generally, the way that that works is that we have to get the organization that's doing that kind of stuff to explain that this is a restoration. And generally, you can slide these things underneath new code by explaining that it's a restoration, and that it's a remodel or something like that.

Where we run into more problems with—than inspectors, really, is with engineering. When we do buildings that are going to be in park districts, for example, which is—and the reason we talk about this is because in general, those are the groups that are saving buildings like this; let's just call them public bodies. It could be historical societies, it could be Park Districts. They then become public use places, and so now we have to engineer a lot of stuff. Engineering actually becomes a lot more of a hassle than inspections do.

‘Cause we have to spend a bunch of time and money doing a lot of things that are probably not really relevant to the building.

We also have to deal with engineers who aren't trained in these kinds of buildings, who don't understand them. There's not a wood engineering program at the University of Illinois, for example, so our state does not support that profession. It's very difficult to get a stamp in Illinois as an engineer. Illinois has what's known as the—I forget what it's called—they call it something. But it's a way to prevent people from other states getting an engineering license in Illinois. So, we can't go to Michigan, where there might be a wood engineer, or New Hampshire, and get him to stamp something. So, the hurdles are huge when it comes to engineering, especially wood engineering, so we end up with steel engineers who don't know what they're doing and drive the cost way out of proportion.

Maniscalco: Now, in terms of restoring barns or, you know, reusing barns, are people making barns into homes? Are they just restoring them so they look nice in the back of their house? What are you finding with your business?

Collins: Well, I think that there are certainly a lot of people that restore barns for homes, and over the years we've worked with quite a few of those folks. I would say that we are not in a culture or a climate here where people restore barns to make them look nice at the back of their house, which is exactly what people are doing in New England. The culture there accepts that much more than the culture here. What we find here is that we have more people who would rather tear them down than save them.

Occasionally, we run across a third or fourth generation farm family whose grandfather built the farm and they want to save it because Grandpa built it, not because it has some sort of economic return. So, we don't see a lot of buildings like that. I wish we saw more. I wish we saw more people that did want to do that. So, this particular fellow here is restoring a building because he values that heritage. So, more—not so much look nice at the back of their property, but some people restore buildings because they value the heritage. They also probably understand that we live in a changing climate—not climate like the temperature, but possibly—but the world is a changing place, and that what doesn't work right now might actually work again in fifty years. So, we see some people who can actually think that far ahead, past today. But we also work for a lot of museums who want these buildings to represent agriculture from a certain time period.

Maniscalco: Now, there's also a portion of your business where you're kind of repurposing the materials to create homes or other types of buildings. Am I correct in that?

Collins: No. We do about fifty percent restoration work with our company. And of that restoration work, fifteen to twenty percent of it might be barns. Some years it

might be fifty percent; some years it might be five percent. I also do a lot of work on church steeples, public buildings, courthouses. For example, we restored the roof system, timber roof system, of the oldest courthouse still in use in Illinois. We've restored the roof system and some other things on the oldest college building still in use in Illinois. We built Fort Massac down in Metropolis, Illinois, which was an 1803 replica fort built by the British. I put the top back on the University of Iowa's Old Main, which is the capital building that's identical to the one in Vendetta [Springfield] that was built in 1837.

So, we do a whole bunch of things like that, as well as the fact that what we do is build new timber-frame homes. And that's probably the other side of our business, as well as commercial work, like; we just built the new log pavilion for the zoo in Peoria, all sorts of stuff. Barns are about fifteen percent of it, but they're something that I believe in pretty strongly.

Maniscalò: What about, I mean, we've been talking a lot about public buildings and barns becoming part of public buildings, but, I mean, what about the cultural aspect to barns? I mean, some people use them to create art, different things like that. Can you kinda explain your experiences with that?

Collins: Like using them as a studio?

Maniscalò: A studio, or even the subject of the picture.

Collins: Oh, sure. Yeah. Yeah. I think people do use them as studios. I wish people used them more as studios, music or art, painting. But as a subject of art, like—?

Maniscalò: Um-hm.

Collins: I don't really know much about that. I mean, I know people take pictures of barns, and there are tons and tons of barn books. And—

Maniscalò: In your experience, have you run across some of these things?

Collins: Not really. Larry Kanfer, the photographer from U of I, or down in Champaign, right—where are you guys from, by the way?

Maniscalò: Springfield. (laughter)

Collins: Springfield. Um, the guy has a studio down—He's been doing—he contacted us last year, and he was doing a, like, hundred barn survey of barns in Illinois or something; some photographic project that he was working on. And at the time that he was doing it, we were dismantling a building and taking one down, like—So Larry Kanfer is probably the only person I know. I've worked

with a couple of other people who have been really fascinated by taking pictures of barns. I personally don't like it when they take pictures or paint pictures of decrepit ones because it gives people the wrong idea. (laughter) I wish they'd paint ones that are in good shape. But I know—yeah. So, I mean, little bits here and there. Like, I know that in our county, in Knox County, a guy who does pen and ink drawings went around and did pen and ink drawings of barns of Knox County, and published a book.

Maniscalco: What do you think the future is going to be for a lot of these old barns around Illinois?

Collins: I think they're probably going to keep going down. You know, there's two major problems with barns in Illinois. One is the fact that this particular soil type here is not one that anybody who settled here had any experience with. Number two, they skimped on the roofs. So what we have are a lot of barns with failed foundations and bad roofs, and those are, like, the two worst things to have. (laughter)

Maniscalco: How does your company deal with those problems? I mean, what do you do to fix it?

Collins: Well, we jack up buildings, and we tear out foundations and put new ones in. We jack up buildings and stabilize foundations. Barns in Illinois were built too close to the ground in general, especially from about LaSalle/Peru on down. From LaSalle/Peru up, the barn builders there used more stone in their foundations. Barns there are in better shape. There are sort of different belt-lines of barns in Illinois. But what we do, of course, is we do a lot of sill repair, where we lift a lot of buildings. Roofs are not too difficult to deal with. We push steel pretty hard because steel is pretty low maintenance, and if you use a non-exposed fastener steel, you can get a hundred year roof out of it, which is what we want.

So, if we can get roofs and foundations underneath these buildings, then we can save them. There is a big push in the thirties to put foundations underneath buildings. I imagine a lot of that had to do with the economic climate at the time. People were trying to scramble to come up with ways to make money and do things, and use what it is that they had. So, we see this uh—especially with the advent of concrete, we see a lot of foundations put underneath buildings from even 1905, 1910 to 1940. After that, we just see a lot of demolition. But we do, we do a lot of bids for lifting buildings up and putting foundations underneath them.

Maniscalco: What barn—I mean, you've worked on a lot of them. What's your favorite barn that you've worked on?

Collins: I think this one.



Maniscalco: This one?

Collins: Um-hm.

Maniscalco: Why?

Collins: It was built by a master carpenter, and over time I've come to appreciate buildings that are built with skill. And this building was built with skill. And it's a fairly complex roof system. I mean, it's not simple—it's advanced. Even in today's world, I probably only have one or two people in my shop that can build a roof system like this, and they've got eight years of training in this same thing. So, what you're looking at really is the work of a master carpenter, and I appreciate that, much like I appreciate well-built church steeples, as opposed to buildings that were built by a bunch of immigrants off a boat, which is what we see often, especially in northern Illinois. We see people going down to the wharf and hiring a bunch of people fresh off the boat with no carpentry experience, and sending them out to build a big building. And there's a lot of flaws, and there's a lot of reasons why we lose those buildings, because that's what happened.

There's a twenty-sided barn up in—I don't know. Those suburbs run together, someplace by Homer Glen—that I like a lot, because I like the fact that they tried to think progressively about ways to handle problems in a dairy operation. And there's a barn in Lafox, Illinois that I'm also very fond of called the Garfield Barn, which is a very, very simple, straightforward hand-hewn threshing barn. Oh, oh, and there's another one in Waterloo. (laughter) It's a really nice threshing barn, and it's all—and the threshing stone is still in the middle, and everything is hewn. It's from, like, the 1830s. So, I probably have four, but two of them are early threshing barns, one is a progressive barn, and the other is probably this one.

Maniscalco: If there was one barn out there besides the one that you're working on now that you would want to work on, that you had seen someplace that every time you drive by it you say, "Man, I wish I could just get in there and work on it," which one is that?

Collins: Well, there's these barns up in northern Michigan. I can't even pronounce what the word is, but they were built by some French guy, and they're all stone with these really complex conical roofs. And I've never driven by them; I've just seen pictures of them. But if I was going to work—yeah, I would love to work on those kind of buildings.

Maniscalco: Cool. You know, you have a lot of experience in agriculture and agricultural buildings. What do you think the future of agriculture is for the state of Illinois?

Collins: The future of agriculture?

Maniscalco: Yeah. Just to change subjects. (laughter)

Collins: Oh. I don't know. I hope it's not going the way it's going right now. I'm not fond of industrial agriculture or big business. I know we farm twenty-eight billion acres of corn, for example, in Illinois. I know there's thirty thousand miles of river in Illinois, and I know that the watershed that I live on is supposedly the worst polluter of the entire Mississippi, watershed for silt. I know that there's a dead zone outside of New Orleans that's like, a hundred and fifty miles into the Gulf of Mexico now. I know that we're using a ton of petrochemicals to farm our fields. I don't like the way it's going at all. I hope it changes. I know they keep building ethanol plants like crazy.

I don't think any of it bodes well for any of us that live in rural places, or even try to not be part of big business. You know, last year, my kids were at the daycare center, and they were sprayed by a guy spraying fungicide—flew over the house and dropped chemical all over them. That's not the kind of climate that I want to live in. And I've been told that what we're supposed to do is just go indoors when that happens, and that he has the right to do that. And I don't think that that's true, and I think that there is a cavalier attitude out there right now about Illinois agriculture with some folks, and I think we see that.

I think that the lack of respect that some people have for buildings and the past is probably indicative of where we are right now, and I don't think you can live in the present without having one foot in the past and one foot in the future. And I don't think we should destroy things just because we don't understand them. And the ecosystem in Illinois is pretty fragile. We're not getting any oak tree regeneration, really, from Rockford on down to Springfield. A lot of that's probably related to climate and chemicals that are being sprayed and used.

I don't agree with raising corn for gasoline, or beans for fuel. I don't think we should be the breadbasket of the world, or try to feed the world. I don't think that's our duty or responsibility. I know that's the bill of sale that we were sold by the Department of Ag.—whatever his name is—Earl Butz—in the seventies—that we would try. I don't think food should be cheap. I think food should be expensive. I do think we should try to all eat within a one hundred or five hundred mile radius.

So, I hope it's not going (laughter) where it's going, because I don't agree with it, and I think that a lot of people don't, and I don't think that very many people are vocal about it. I do think we should have more small dairy farms. I do think that there should be more farms, and that we shouldn't do what it is that we're doing today.

Maniscalco: Interesting. I have one last question for you, and that—you know, this is an oral history interview. It's going to be included in the Illinois State Museum's collection; it's going to be put on a website and exhibited, all kinds of stuff. Is there something you wanted to put in here: for a message maybe for your kids, for your great-great-grandkids down the line? So, when they come to the museum and they look on the shelf, and they see there's great-grandpa on the shelf there, what do you want to have in this interview for them?

Collins: What would I put in there? (laughter)

Maniscalco: Yeah. This is your opportunity.

Collins: This is my opportunity? (laughter)

Maniscalco: Anything you want.

Collins: Fix your building. (laughter) Put a good foundation underneath it. Put a good roof on it. And don't tear something down just because you don't understand it. And that you should maintain things. And that there is a value in small family farms, and that's important. I think it's important to us culturally, and I think it's important to us as a nation that we have small family farms with sustainable practices. And the early farms were built with sustainability as a thought—keeping some acreage of timber aside so that you could always fix your building. So I would stress that that's important, that sustainability is important, and that it has to start at home, and it has to start with the small farm.

Maniscalco: Great. Well, thank you very much, Rick.

Collins: You're welcome.

Warren: That's a great interview. Thank you.

Collins: You're welcome.

Warren: We've had a lot of great ones—this is one of the best.

Collins: (laughter) Oh, thank you.

(end of interview)