Interview with Debra Reid

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Maniscalco: Today is August 5, 2008. We're sitting in the Illinois State Museum with Debra Reid. How are you doing today, Debra?

Reid: Fine.

Maniscalco: Great. Well, thank you for coming over here. It's really a pleasure to sit down here with you.

Reid: My pleasure.

Maniscalco: We're going to ask you the real easy questions first. So I guess we'll go date of birth and place of birth.

Reid: July 2, 1960, in Chester, Illinois.

Maniscalco: Now, where you were born, did you have a lot of your immediate family around that area?

Reid: The home place was a farm that my folks bought in 1954, and it was not adjacent to but was within a half-mile of the home place that the Reid family, my father's family, had purchased back in the 1850s. So there were a lot of my father's family in the area. But my mother's were not close, in country miles. They may have been, I don't know, eight or ten miles away. But we spent a lot more time with my father's family than with my mother's.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Can you kind of tell us, what kind of family was it? Describe your family.

Reid: Father's family, there were a total of six children, with his father having been born in 1876. So it's a very old lineage, in terms of children being born late. So I grew up with people who would have been most folks' grandparents' age, who happened to be my parents and aunts and uncles. That was my father's side. My mother's side: a huge Catholic family—Polish Catholic. She was one

of eight, and all of them had large families, and all of her aunts and uncles had large families. And I didn't realize as a child, growing up, how close her family was, because the wife married the husband and came in sort of to the fold of the father's family. And they were Protestants, Presbyterians, so there wasn't a lot of (laughs) exchange between the two families, let's just say.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Interesting. Now, I mean, obviously you remember your grandparents. Can you kind of describe what your grandparents were like?

Reid: Yeah. My grandfather, Harry Reid, was—oh, gosh. Well, he died when he was ninety-six, and that was in the late sixties. Well, you can do the math from 1876. He was blind by the time I remember him, from glaucoma, so I don't have a sense of him being an active person. But he had grown up in the St. Louis area and was a musician and farmer—kind of a jack-of-all-trades sort of person. And when I was a child, I didn't realize this, but the more that I began to research it, he was sort of a reverse migration person, who had lived with family in St. Louis, even though another part of the family had the farm in Rockwood, Illinois, and then at some point in his life, he moved to the farm and maintained it.

Maniscalco: What kind of musician was he?

Reid: He had a little mandolin—a potato bug, they called it—one of those bow-back mandolins. And he played cornet and drums. The family tradition has it that he learned from East St. Louis jazz musicians, but I can't substantiate any of that.

Maniscalco: That's cool. Did you get many opportunities to sit down and talk with him as a little kid?

Reid: Not really. Not within my memory. I remember being very comfortable around him. And I loved my grandmother. Her maiden name was Frasier. And she just was a cook and loved people to be around. She did handicraft stuff, which my mother never did, and so sometimes I'd sit at her right-hand side, and she'd try to teach me something—which I wasn't very good at learning.

Maniscalco: What kind of crafts?

Reid: Crochet, mostly, I think, and needlepoint and that sort of thing. I don't know if she knitted. And I eventually adopted things that she didn't teach me, like knitting. But it was just that my mother never had time for that sort of stuff, and Grandma Reid was retired—as you're retired as a farm woman—and kind of liked me as one of only two granddaughters. So she talked to me, and I liked that. (both laugh) And Grandpa was quieter, I think, more reserved, but I was comfortable around both of them.

My mother's parents—my grandmother—her name would have been Elizabeth Novak Sermon, she lived with us until she had a stroke and then

went into a nursing home. She always sort of scared me because she was very strict. But I don't think that was her nature, but that was my memory of her. Every morning she'd get up and sweep, and I always figured I'd be swept out (both laugh) with the dust. And she had tendencies of, I think, an old Polish parsimonious person. And she'd suck fish heads because she knew there were nutrients in the fish heads in fish soup. So she was just sort of Old World to me, even though she lived with us. And she had been born in this country, so it wasn't as if she came from Poland. And then my grandfather on my mother's side had died before I was born.

Maniscalco: Now, being a historian, I'm sure you know your family history and how your family got to Illinois.

Reid: Not as much as I should, (laughs) but I can hum a few bars.

Maniscalco: Well, probably more than most people. Can you kind of explain how that kind of worked?

Reid: Yes. As far as I know, the Reid side, he immigrated in-- Well, perhaps as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars. He came from Birmingham, England. He was, I want to say, John DeGrows Reid. And what little bit we know about him, he naturalized in Philadelphia in the 1820s and then ended up, through Kentucky, marrying a Kentuckian in St. Louis, and then they settled on the banks of a creek not too far off the Mississippi River, in Rockwood, which at that time was called Liberty, Illinois. A fairly thriving grist mill and sawmill river town. And they had eight sons, and then the father of the group—the immigrant—drowned in the Mississippi.

So he left his eight kids. And his widow then married a Frickey and moved to St. Louis. And so these eight sons kind of scattered, with one of them maintaining this farm in Rockwood, which had historically been called Liberty. And then, it was sort of back and forth on the little dingy between St. Louis and Rockwood fairly consistently. A wife came from Ohio, Turza Allen, and the property's actually in her name in the late nineteenth century. And then my father was born there in 1917 on this little piece of property. It was only ever about 100 acres.

Then my mother's side came in the 1850s—the Novak side, from Poland, and settled in Poland Station—well, Palestine Precinct was sort of the geopolitical name. There was a growing German-Catholic population there in close proximity to the French-Catholic population, so I think it was a natural place for Catholic Poles to go. And there was a kinship-based extended community that the Novak and then the Sermon family became a part of. And my mother's grandfather showed up in the 1860s—1867 or so—and nearly immediately married a woman, also of this Polish extended network, who already had three kids and a farm. So that's how he came to have property that is descended in another branch of the family than my mother's direct line.

Maniscalco: That's very interesting. I mean, you have quite a family history. But you were a child that grew up as well, and you had a lot of time on the farm and your childhood on the farm. Can you kind of explain what your childhood was like, living on the farm?

Reid: Work. (he laughs) Not as much work as you would think, I think in hindsight. I was born in '60, so you know, we have electricity. My mother says running water and electricity were the best inventions. So I have sort of a modern farm childhood, with less stoop labor—you know, no having to do a lot of... Well, having said that, we shoveled manure with the best of them. We were hog farmers when I was a small child, and so hog manure, manure out of the stables. Gardening—my mother was a huge gardener and canner, so we were constantly planting potatoes, pulling green beans. She also raised chickens, and the eggs, of course, from the chickens. So we candled eggs constantly through the week, and on Friday nights, we'd deliver them to the town of Chester, which was eight miles away, to nursing homes and private buyers. And then we'd always go to Whittenbrink's Tavern after that and have a hamburger, and my folks would drink beer. So that was sort of a weekly ritual.

They did a lot of apple butter making, and periodically they would kill forty chickens at a time. And they would take the chickens, put them in wooden boxes, cages, and haul them to this feed mill where there was a black miller who would kill all the chickens in one fell swoop, and then they'd haul them back, and we'd spend the next day and a half cleaning chickens. So then you'd always have to have chicken and dumplings, (both laugh) which were difficult to swallow after all of that. So that's my memory of the rhythm on the farm. My favorite work was haying—

Maniscalco: Really?

Reid: —which most people loathe, but I loved getting out there. You know, you'd walk through, turn bales, throw them on the wagon, haul them into the barn.

Maniscalco: It was fun.

Reid: Just favorite memories. Yeah.

Maniscalco: What was the worst chore that you had?

Reid: Definitely chicken-cleaning.

Maniscalco: Really?

Reid: Yes. No matter if it was one or forty, it was not something I enjoyed.

Maniscalco: Now why were they butchering so many at a time?

Reid: I think it's just part of—what do they say?—scale of production when you have a flock that's for laying. And at that time, that's still largely the egg money, the disposable income that a farm family had, even at that time for my mother and father, came from her chickens and her eggs. So when the layers stopped laying, they were no good, (he laughs) and they got it. (both laugh) And they went into the freezer. We didn't sell those; we consumed them throughout the winter.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned something about candling eggs. Can you kind of tell us, since you've obviously done quite a bit, can you tell us what that is and how you do it and everything else?

Reid: Sure. Well, it starts with gathering the eggs, which you did every morning, and perhaps every evening, but I don't remember the evening component, just the morning. Mother had these little round-bottomed baskets that were made of willow—and a local fellow had made them—and you'd carry those to the chicken house, and you know, move the hens, gather the eggs, wash them. And then there was a little scale that you weighed them. It was a little tiny aluminum contraption, and you'd set the egg on one end, and the other end—you know, they balance out, and you'd get the weight of the egg, so that's how you graded them. And candling them—I do not remember the little machine, but you'd check to see if there was a sperm in the egg, and if there was, then they went in this box as a fertilized egg, and the others went into the non-fertilized box, and that was what candling meant. And you could sell both; there was no difference, veritably, between the eggs. But you graded them by weight and by whether they were fertilized or not.

Maniscalco: Very interesting. Now, getting back to growing up on the farm, you're kind of out in the country and everything else. How about friends?

Reid: (laughs) There was one girl that lived in the general vicinity, but she was too far removed to be somebody that you could play with regularly. My folks sometimes hauled me over there, and we'd jump on her trampoline or something, but that wasn't typical. But there were plenty of boys in the neighborhood, so I grew up playing Wiffle ball and all the other sports with the guys. And you could say it ruined me for life, because I'm 48, and I still play vintage baseball (he laughs) right along with the guys and continue to hold my own. So my childhood was really playing with my brothers' friends. There are childhood photographs of me at Christmas with my brother, and he's got the barn, and I've got the house—you know, the typical farmhouse and farm barn toys. And I played with them, and he played with the house as much as I played with the barn. And we played in the dirt. But we very much entertained ourselves when we weren't playing Wiffle ball. And usually it was with little toy tractors in the dirt in the garden—which I'm sure my mother loved because we helped keep the weeds down. (he laughs) And there was a dirt pile. They had dug out the basement of the house. The house had no basement when they bought it. It was a nineteen aughts supposedly mail-order

house, and so when they bought it, they dug out a basement. So there was this pile of dirt that sat right behind the basement door. And my brother and I would spend hours just playing in the dirt pile.

Maniscalco: Really? (both laugh)

Reid: Simple pleasures, I guess.

Maniscalco: No, that's great. So I guess you kind of grew up with a lot of boys. There was just—

Reid: There weren't that many, actually; there were about three or four.

Maniscalco: Oh, really?

Reid: Yeah, yeah. One family of two, another family of one. And they weren't close, by any stretch. They were a mile and many miles away, but they'd congregate.

Maniscalco: Now, were you able to walk that mile to go see them or ride your bike to go see them?

Reid: Yeah. They usually came to our farm. We had the best yard for (laughs) baseball, and my mother tolerated Kool-Aid afterward. (he laughs) She always fed them and watered them, as it were.

Maniscalco: No, that's great. Now, what about organizations? You know, 4-H, FFA, things like that. Were there those sorts of things around?

Reid: There was one year of 4-H, and that was it. And I was probably eleven, maybe twelve. And a local woman who—kind of postmistress and mayoral type for this town of, you know, forty people—she organized a 4-H club. And it was exciting, but aside from meeting occasionally and baking brownies for the county fair, I don't remember much about it. And that was the extent of any kind of true rural organization. There was a church in the little community, which still exists—in Rockwood. It was Presbyterian, so my father's side of the family pretty much ran it. But we never went there. We drove to Chester to the Catholic church—St. Mary's Catholic Church.

Maniscalco: So your father's family is Presbyterian and your mother's is Catholic, and your mother always drove you guys to the Catholic church?

Reid: Well, my mother never drove.

Maniscalco: Or your father.

Reid: Yeah. And my mother basically told my father, "I won't marry you unless you become Catholic." And so he complied, let's say. So that's old, traditional Catholic, that there's no question about marriage if there's not a conversion.

And my father did wholeheartedly—well, I shouldn't say that. I'm assuming he did wholeheartedly (both laugh) because he still goes. My mother's now deceased; he still goes to the Catholic church. And we were raised Catholic, and we went to the parochial school in Chester.

Maniscalco: Now you were going to a Catholic church, but you said you spent a lot of time with your father's family, who was not Catholic. Was that ever a problem?

Reid: Not that I know of. It never was discussed as a problem. I think sometimes—well, as a child, I loved Sundays, because we'd go to church either by 6:00 AM on Sunday morning, or when they canceled that mass, it was Saturday night. So Sunday noon, we all congregated at my father's parents' home, the old Reid home place, and they'd have these huge Sunday dinners. And I loved it. I didn't realize as a child how much of an expectation that was and how much my mother probably would have sometimes liked to have done something else, maybe with her own family, even. But that was the tradition. And the more I learn about my grandmother—the Reid grandmother—or, her maiden name Frasier and Reid—the more I think she just was a fairly strong-willed individual, and people sort of did what she liked them to do. (both laugh) And they got fine feedback—I don't know what the word is—they got good food as a consequence, so they were—payback, that's the word. They were happy to comply, I think.

Maniscalco: I'm having this idea of this family dinner on every Sunday. Can you kind of explain it? What would it be like, for somebody who wasn't there?

Reid: Well, lots of food, usually meat-based meal. Right? What else on a farm? So lots of fried chicken, often pot roast, and then all the trimmings. So fried mushrooms when morel mushrooms were in season, new potatoes and peas when it was early summer. If they'd been out fishing—we weren't too far from the Mississippi River, and fishing in the slews and on the riverbank was pretty common. So if they'd get a carp or a buffalo, it would be fried fish for dinner. And always, I would say, lots of desserts—pies and cakes. And not just one thing, but they always had to have three or four things. It was (laughs) quite excessive—another reason why I think I loved it as a child. And in terms of who sat around the table, it was my father, mother, and my brother and me; and then the grandparents until they departed; my father's two sisters who never married and stay on the home place; and then another brother and his wife, who lived up the hillside. So this was the typical group. And then there was another sister who lived in the Alton area, and they would drive down regularly, specifically for these meals. And it was a large number of people. We always preceded or followed the meal with a game of pinochle, or more than one. So that's... We played croquet a lot. One of the things I most regretted was when everybody just got too old and lost interest in croquet, (he laughs) because those were always, you know, rousing matches.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, I mean, you had to have lots of cousins there.

Reid: No cousins.

Maniscalco: No cousins at all? Really?

Reid: No. Out of this huge family of—well, six on my father's side, total—my brother and I were the only direct kin. One of his sisters had adopted a daughter; she and her husband adopted a daughter. So there was a lot of attention to be given to basically two... My brother and I were ten years younger than my cousin, so she got a lot of attention for ten years, and then we came along and sort of diverted the attention. But yeah, no extended family of youth on my father's side. And my mother's side, with all of those siblings, they had children, but we didn't do a lot with those.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now with so many people, were these meals outside, inside?

Reid: Inside.

Maniscalco: Inside?

Reid: Yeah. Maybe one birthday, there was a picnic outside, but the meals within my memory were all inside. And I think it may have had something to do with just the grandparents' infirmities, not being able to get up and down the stairs as easily.

Maniscalco: And was your grandmother the main cook, or were duties kind of spread out among everybody? She cooked everything?

Reid: She cooked everything until my aunts—the two unmarried sisters that lived with them—eventually took on more of the responsibility as she couldn't.

Maniscalco: That's pretty neat, actually. (laughs)

Reid: My aunt who lived in Alton, she would bring her friends down. She's ninety-five now, this aunt—Totty Corinne Reid who married a Beatty. And she says that her friends never could get over the quantity of food that Grandma would cook for whoever came. So she loved to cook, and she spared no effort.

Maniscalco: (laughs) That's a great memory. That's pretty neat. To move from church and from Sundays to the rest of the week, what about school? Where did you go to school?

Reid: Went to school at St. Mary's parochial school, Catholic school. It's actually St. Mary's Help of Christian Catholic Church and Affiliated School. And that was in Chester, Illinois, and that was first through eighth grade. (laughs) I had also attended Head Start, which I guess, that would have been in, what, '65, or probably one of the first years that there was actually Head Start. And I didn't want to leave the farm. My mother had to chase me around the house one way and my father the other to get me caught, (he laughs) and then put me in the

car that a friend drove, and they were afraid I'd jump out. That must have been very traumatic for them. And my Head Start teacher said I'd never amount to anything, (laughs) which mother always—still—well, not still; she's deceased now—but would take offense at every time she thought about it. But somehow, I managed to control myself and ended up in first grade. And then I went to grade school at the Catholic School and then high school at Chester High School in Chester, Illinois.

Maniscalco: Now what was it like—I mean, was it all country kids going to school, or mixed?

Reid: It was a mixed group, yeah. They bused kids in from a fairly wide area that included a lot of farm kids—from Ellis Grove area north of town over to Perry County, east of town; Rockwood, south of Chester. There were thirty-six in my grade school class; there were 124 in my high school class. So it wasn't a large number of people. And Chester's a town of maybe 8,000, which probably includes the inmates in Menard Prison and the mental hospital.

Maniscalco: Now of course not all those kids were growing up on farms out in the country; some of them were town kids. Was there any conflict between that, or like a misunderstanding, or...?

Reid: Not that I ever noticed. I had friends who were city kids—well, "city" if you could count Chester as city—and friends who were country kids. In fact, I would say that my friends were predominantly from town. And that's just the way it happened, I think.

Maniscalco: Did you ever have any of those town friends out to the farm?

Reid: Regularly.

Maniscalco: Do you remember any of their, you know...

Reid: Well, yeah. Cheryl Wholesome was a good friend in grade school, and she would come out, and we'd try to ride the horses together, for example. We had a couple little ponies when I was a kid, and that was always an attraction. But living that far out of town—"that far"—eight miles. I mean, today it doesn't seem like anything. But my parents weren't—I mean, they had their times when they went to town, but it wasn't go to town every day or multiple times a day the way it could be now. They were incredibly frugal people; they didn't like to use gas, and so I think I was fairly isolated. My parents didn't really support my being in any sports until I got my license to drive, and then I could get into high school track and my brother into baseball in high school. He probably played basketball in grade school, too. So there wasn't a lot of exchange during the weekends or during the summers with friends from town. I socialized during school but didn't have a lot of opportunities to play with friends from town otherwise.

Maniscalco: Let's move from school to the farm. You've mentioned that there were chickens, you mentioned that there was all kinds of different—haying going on. What kind of farm was it, exactly?

Reid: Classic diversified sort of subsistence-based farm, in the modern perspective. So there was also commercial agriculture and for-market production. The farm that my father and mother bought was about 180 acres, and it had had an orchard on it with still some remnant trees, but they did not go that route. They fenced and raised cattle. And they had fenced pasture, too, and all the corn and bean fields were fenced. And it was typical that—I don't know what the ratio of beans to corn—but if they planted corn, they'd have some land set aside for wheat that they'd double-crop to soybeans. They'd turn up pasture every seven years or so, so that there was some rotation. My father could tell you what that rotation was, but I couldn't. (he laughs) In terms of pasture, maybe thirty acres was devoted to that so that they knew they had enough square bales of hay to take the cattle through a season.

In terms of the number of cattle, he would get a registered Hereford bull, but the cows were just grade Hereford cows. And he had as many as 100 at any given time, between like twenty brood cows and two years' worth of calves. By the early seventies, we started buying dairy calves and raising them up. So it was a brood cow and finishing operation. And today you'd call it all-organic, because they were all range-fed, grass-fed, grain-fed. And they kept cattle from '54 when they bought the place until the early 1990s—or late—probably '98, when they finally sold the cattle. And that was a sad day. So that kind of... And then there were hogs. They sort of left hogs eventually and went to the feeder calves. And then the chickens, which my mother also abandoned about 1970. They decided that with the kids in high school, they needed more stable income than just the farming, and so my mother went to work in a cake mix in Steeleville, Illinois—part of Gilster–Mary Lee Corporation. And that's how she earned a stable income. And she did that until she retired.

Maniscalco: Now you said it was a very sad day when you had to sell the cows. Can you kind of explain why it came to that?

Reid: Yeah, well... "Why it came to that." My father has these little infections in his toes—wounds don't heal. No one knows why. And he just finally lost a leg on February 27, after all these years. And he, at one point—one winter—was laid up with this foot problem, and my mother was doing all the work on the farm. And so I guess they discussed the situation, and they finally agreed to sell the cattle. My mother would have been in her early seventies at the time—well, or even mid-seventies. And then she developed cancer not too far after that, so she wouldn't have been able to keep the cattle anyway. My brother couldn't do anything. He worked in a cake mix, had his own family in Percy, Illinois. And I was living in either Maine or upstate New York at the time, so you know, too far removed to do anything.

Maniscalco: That must have been very difficult for your entire family.

Reid: Yeah. I think it's a combination of aging—when you know that you can't... Retiring in farming is not like any—well, retiring in any occupation is difficult, I would say, but farmers tend to, I don't know, retire in a different way. And my father would have been in his eighties when they finally sold the cattle. And he didn't persist as long as my uncle, John Russell, who had the small piece up the hill from the homestead. He was ninety-six, I think, before they forced him to sell the cattle, and he was dying of cancer. Or he was ninety-three when he died of cancer. So it's just a group of people that don't like to stop. So it's a sign of mortality. And a huge change in the land, because without cattle, all your cattle paths grow up, all the brush in the woods grows up, the fire threats are greater, the fences go into disrepair. I mean, it's a total transformation when you get out of stock.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned that at one point you did hogs. What was the farm like before your father and mother took it over? What was it previously?

Reid: All I can say is total speculation on my part because I was born six years later, after they bought it. But in '54, they bought it from a man named George Reinniker, and he had—I assume, but I don't know this for certain—that it's his family that built the house on the property. So it would have been a farm that was—or at least the farmhouse and barns were built during the Golden Age of Agriculture in the early twentieth century—a time when crop prices were the highest they'd been and people had the capital to invest. And I'm not sure, but I think that the Reinniker family—and if not the Reinnikers, I could find the name of the other family who had the orchard. But my father remembered actually coming up and harvesting whatever fruit from trees or bushes was in season at the time. So it was, likewise, I would argue, a diversified kind of operation, but obviously some effort to participate in the market.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now you mentioned that the farm would have been classified today as organic. Can you kind of explain what was their methodology—what was their idea behind farming? Was it, you know, conservation, or...? Can you kind of talk about that?

Reid: Yeah. I need to clarify. I mentioned that the cattle could be certified organic because they're grass-fed, grain-fed, but I don't know that that would have been the case then, because vet medicine—if a cow had a hurt foot, she got a shot of whatever, and I don't know what. Pinkeye was something that they constantly doctored for, which is an inflammation of the eye that comes when the grass in a pasture is too tall in mid- to late summer. And the eyes get inflamed; the flies exacerbate the problem. And so we were always doctoring for pinkeye. That might have disqualified, you know, in modern terms, an organic operation. And my father also liked his pesticides and herbicides and

fertilizers, so we wouldn't be able to be certified organic, I don't think, given the way my parents had operated.

But philosophically, they were an incredibly thrifty lot. They were non-materialists. They did not purchase the newest model of tractor or the largest model of tractor. I think they were confined in those decisions by what they considered not a lot of disposable income on their part. And the fields—it's definitely a hilly, very small-field place. And you can only have certain kinds of equipment operating in those fields. They also just didn't want to borrow money, and so they lived within their means. And they never had debt. I'm not sure what the contract was when they bought the farm, but my mother once said, "We paid as much for the farm in 1954 as we did for this van in 1992,"—you know, 22,000 dollars or something like that—or 2002, I guess it would have been—or 2000. It doesn't matter (he laughs) the specificity of the date and the van purchase.

So they worked in a shoe factory before they saved up enough money. They believed then they could put the down payment on this farm. They bought a truck—brand-new truck—the day I was born. I'm not sure what my mother thought about that, but that's how my father celebrated. And it had "H.G. Reid Farm" on it. But they survived all those years, never had debt, and sank money into CDs because they just didn't spend it. So I think of them as philosophically anti-capitalist kind of more-or-less efficient operation.

Maniscalco: Where would you say they got this idea, this mindset?

Reid: (laughs) The Depression is all I can... I can't imagine where else it came from. And I inherited it, so maybe it is a genetic trait. But not all members of the family share it. They were both Depression-era folk. My father was in the three-Cs during the Depression—wanted to be in Illinois but ended up in Michigan—Great Lakes in Illinois and then different places in Michigan. And my mother was born in '24, so she would have been a young teen throughout the Depression. And I think they came by that parsimonious nature through those experiences.

Maniscalco: Do you remember them talking about the Depression at all, and how it was for them?

Reid: My mother never reminisced about such things. My father's family—the family does fairly constantly, and he relives his three-Cs experience fairly constantly. You know, typical childhood memories of not wanting for anything, but not totally recognizing what the circumstances were. The father's side, he delivered papers, so he had a little bit of an income even when he was a young teen throughout the Depression.

Maniscalco: Now, to get back to you on the farm, you grew up on this farm, you went to high school on the farm. Now eventually you left, (she laughs) and you went to college. How was that?

Reid: That was traumatic.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Was it?

Reid: Yeah. The day that Pope John Paul—John Paul, yes—the one that died fairly rapidly. It was the day the white smoke came up out of the Vatican for him that I was on the road to college, and I never went back home. I mean, I went a week later and then began the typical holiday visits. And I don't know. I can't explain it. But as a child, I never wanted to leave the farm, never wanted to go anywhere, and the day I hit the college campus, it was as if I never took the opportunity or made the effort to try to go home. Always visited, always loved it, but always went back to wherever I was. And then over the next twenty years I lived in eight states and a foreign country. And always worked with living history farms and agricultural museums, so I kept the rural focus and the interest, but... And then in 1999, I got the position in Charleston, Illinois, teaching at Eastern Illinois University in the history department. So I'm able, now within three hours of home, to see the family and keep my feet in the Mississippi mud, as it were, on a fairly regular basis.

Maniscalco: What was it like—because I mean, a young woman at that time, it was probably difficult for you to go off to college, or a little bit more difficult. Was it, or...?

Reid: I don't... It was 19...

Maniscalco: (unintelligible) (laughs)

Reid: Well, you know, if it was traumatic, I've put it out of my mind. It was 1982, and I went to Southeast Missouri State in Cape Girardeau. And I used to joke that, yeah, "Get on route three, turn right, and I'm basically at campus. Turn left out of SEMO, get on route three, and turn right, and I'm home." An hour drive. So it was very close. I didn't feel—you know, the trauma of leaving home and the anxiety of being in a new situation, but that quickly evaporated.

Maniscalco: What about your parents? Were you parents very supportive of it, or..?

Reid: (laughs) You know, my parents, I don't know. My mother had an eighth-grade education, and really didn't—she wasn't a person that was motivated by learning things; she was a worker. And my father had gone through high school with a high school certificate, but he had then gone into the three-Cs and then joined the Navy in December of 1940, so before the war, but never wanted to go further. But I had these two aunts who never married that were both teachers—they both had Master's degrees. They wanted me to go to SIU Carbondale, which was just too large—though closer. And so Southeast

Missouri was where a lot of my friends from Chester High School went, and in hindsight, I don't remember it as traumatic. I'm sure I was anxious at the time.

I didn't know what I was going to do. You know, be a teacher, but I wasn't that excited about certain education classes. And then a professor in history said, "Oh, we're starting a historic preservation program. You could be one of the first students." And I was like, "You can actually work in this field?" So I got a BS in historic preservation, and then my travels began. I joined museums, and I saw the world.

Maniscalco: Now, what did your brother end up doing?

Reid: He graduated from high school and the next day put his application in at the cake mix where my mother was working, in Steeleville, Illinois. And he still does that to this very day. He graduated in—well, I misspoke. He graduated in '80 from high school. I actually entered college in '78; I graduated in '82. But David has been working at the cake mix since 1980, which is only about fourteen miles from the farm. And he lives in Percy, Illinois with his family.

Maniscalco: So you went through college, you got into historic preservation. Let's talk a little bit about some of the things that you've done. (unintelligible) you've always kept that rural focus. Can you kind of tell us a little bit about some of the things that you've done?

Reid: Sure, as briefly as possible. (he laughs) I applied for a fellowship at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts, and I spent a summer as part of my undergrad college requirements there. And this was an incredible facility on the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts. Totally agriculture-focused. Those farms were in incredibly rich land. They raised stall-fed beef for the Boston market. And I just realized that there was diversity of agricultural practices all across the land. And from there—you know, I'd met friends—I ended up going to Maine and working at a living history farm called the Washburn-Norlands—N-o-r-l-a-n-d-s—in Livermore, Maine. And that had been a farm home, but of an incredibly influential political family. So two years there—got to drive oxen and teams of horses. (he laughs) Became informed about the heritage vegetables and different kinds of crops and stock.

I managed the farmer's museum in Cooperstown, New York. Well, I got my MA in history museum studies through the Cooperstown graduate program '85 to '87 and then managed the Farmers' Museum there for five years. Then I went to Denmark, and I stayed in the staff quarters at the National Open Air Museum there, which is all collections of farmsteads and agricultural buildings. Then I went to Texas, and I managed a museum at the Baylor campus—the Governor Bill and Vera Daniel Historic Village—and it was a sharecropper and tenant farm community, largely of the descendants of slaves

from that general area. Out of that research for that site emerged eventually my dissertation, which I completed at Texas A&M.

And now I have the position at Eastern, which is partially working with the Historical Administration Program there, and partnering with places like Lincoln Log Cabin, which is the farm of Lincoln's father and stepmother, and teaching history. And then I asked the folks at U of I, "Would you like an ag history course," and they said sure, so I now get to teach also as an adjunct associate professor in the agriculture—what is it?—Agriculture Consumer and Environmental Sciences College at the U of I. So I've just managed to build my career around rural and agricultural history and in collection and interpretation.

Maniscalco: That's great. Seeing as you are as an agricultural history professor, I'm wondering if maybe we could talk a little bit about the history of agriculture in Illinois. And can you kind of get us started? I guess to start, you'd need to talk about immigration to Illinois, and who was here first, and when, and how that would work.

Reid: Well, yeah, sparing you the whole course outline that I do... (he laughs) Course contact—I mean, you can't talk about Illinois agriculture unless you address the Kaskaskia Indians and the other members of this large Illini group that were in the area—well, and beyond the Illini to other branches of different language groups that were in other parts of the state. So briefly, we talk about native agriculture and the maternalistic idea of not land ownership but land stewardship. And then in terms of immigrants, we start with the French and their interesting kind of open field and yet slave-based system of agriculture. And the Germans, being the most prolific in terms of sheer numbers of immigrants... Look across the Illinois landscape, and there are German family names everywhere. I talk about little discrete communities like the Poles that came in that nobody knows about unless you're one of them, and then the sort of migration patterns from the upland south, the Middle Atlantic, Pennsylvania, and then the New England folks into the north of the state. So hit and miss with that.

What determines, in my humble opinion, agricultural practices in the state is the land and transportation networks as much as the culture of the people who came. And the topography and the different ways that people sort of took who they were and what practices they had done and adapted them to the markets, to the transportation networks, to the topography in the area. I talk about that, in a way, to try to help the kids understand that there's just not one way of doing things. I'm not sure to the degree that it get transferred to them, but monoculture is not the only answer to agriculture in Illinois. So I sort of start that trend way back with the French and move forward.

Maniscalco: You know, doing this project, we've realized that there's tons of different types of agriculture in Illinois. And through your research, I'm kind of

curious, have you found that there is regions to this is where this type of agriculture occurs, this is where this type...? Can you...?

Reid: That's a good question that I don't know if I can answer. I think historically, there tended to be more hillside type of farming with a greater emphasis on diversification in marginal land areas. So that would be river valleys in the southern part of the state. In the central part of the state, they were just slow in settling because it was just swamp, and so folk who knew how to drain land—Germans, including Mennonites, came over and facilitated that. But that open, flat land lent itself to larger scales of production. So there were different approaches. More concentration on larger scales of production in different places.

And then you've got things like the Staley Company in Decatur and the huge effort made in soybeans that was a brand new cash crop in the twenties. And North Carolina had exceeded Illinois in production until about twenty—I don't know—'23, '25, something like that—and then Illinois just took off, because it was a new cash crop. And U of I embraced it—soybeans—more than it did hybrid corn. They had a heck of a time trying to get folks to change their culture to farm hybrid corn. A much easier time getting them to plant something like soybeans. So people in that zone of central Illinois were more inclined to operate in that way. But I'm amazed, today, some of the largest farmers are in the southern part of the state. They buy marginal land, they clear it, they practice fairly good stewardship, and they're operating just as much acreage as the guys in the central part of the state are.

Maniscalco: It's kind of interesting, also, to me—you mentioned the University of Illinois. And I think it's possibly one of the universities in the country that is most involved in agriculture, probably. Why is that relationship there through history? They kind of seem to work with farmers hand-in-hand.

Reid: They're a land-grand institution. During Lincoln's administration, the Congress—largely in an effort to get the North to buy into the government and its wartime policies—passed legislation called the Morrill Land-Grant Act, 1862, and it created these land-grant universities all across the nation. Now just by passing the legislation, each legislature had to approve it and fund it with some matching funds from the U.S.—well, matching land that the states could sell. Anyway, out of that emerges U of I. But all states have land-grant institutions, and some of them have two: one that was traditionally African-American and one that is sort of the 1862 land-grant institution. So I think in any state, you'd have a university like this that people would look to for information about agriculture.

One of the interesting things was the contested nature of agriculture at U of I over time. It was very much a part of the curriculum to begin with, but very few people went to U of I for agriculture. I mean, if you're going to go to college, go for math or science of physics. So there was a huge recruitment

effort to build the college of agriculture. And this is in the seventies, eighties, nineties. By the twentieth century, they're drawing on students. More national legislation has been passed that facilitated the growth of agriculture at land-grant universities. Nineteen-fourteen, the Smith-Lever Act creates the Agricultural Extension Service, and that's supposed to be implemented out of the land grants. Nineteen-seventeen, the Smith-Hughes Act, which was to train teachers of agriculture and vocational studies, and they looked to the land grants to take on that responsibility. So those are the things that bolstered the connection between agriculture and the land grants.

But there was a lot of competition throughout the twentieth century with Illinois State wanting to start training ag teachers, because Illinois State was the teachers' college, and U of I, "No, no, we're going to keep training ag teachers." And ironically, we move into the fifties, the college of agriculture at U of I was training people for all kinds of ag business, but you look at the long curriculum list, and they didn't say the word "farmer" in there anywhere. So it's a funny relationship between the farmer and the sorts of resources, particularly educational resources, through the standard curriculum at the college of ag at the U of I.

And what happens is sometimes other private companies take in the slack, and so farmers, I think, today, turn to places like Monsanto and other corporations for information, sometimes even more than they do U of I, and I think maybe land-grants are not in a crisis mode but trying to rethink their position in terms of research that directly benefits farmers, not just ag business or ag engineering or ag economics.

Maniscalco: Another thing that kind of—well, it's not an institution, but it's a big thing in the state that has probably had quite a large effect on agriculture is the city of Chicago and the markets. Can you kind of explain a little bit of that?

Reid: I'd refer you to Bill Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*, (both laugh) a great book about how this city is what it is because of the tendrils of railroads that come out of it. The Illinois Central Railroad was one that was very involved in ag science from its formation, and it was reasonable for a railroad that comes out Chicago to hire specialists and technicians to talk to farmers. Get farmers along your route growing the things that Chicagoans need, and you've got this huge market, garden, and milk shed that extends way beyond the geographic confines of Chicago.

I know much less about the railroads, but what I've found fascinating and what I've done a little research on is the ways that different industrialists in Chicago advocated for agriculture, and not just people like the machinery manufacturers, like McCormick, but the McCormicks who get involved with newspaper publishing. They had experimental farms that operated during the thirties and these gentleman farms that they kept prize cattle, and horses, and sheep, and chickens, and you name it. And they would have columns in the

papers—the *Chicago Tribune* is the paper that the McCormicks operated—and from the thirties, they had this column called "Day to Day on the Farm," and the columnist would report on what was going on at the *Chicago Tribune* experimental farm, which was out, I want to say, in the Wheaton area. And then there was another one that was even further west, in Libertyville. That's not right, not Lib—I can't think of the town farther west. But anyway, the city knew that its interests lied—laid—whatever—(he laughs) in agriculture and did what it could to draw that agriculture closer to the city for context purposes, and also encourage the cultivation of crops it needed farther away from the city.

Maniscalco: You mentioned the McCormicks. There is John Deere. I know that the refrigerated boxcar came from Illinois. There's all these inventions that are ag-focused. Can you kind of give us... Do you know of anything interesting?

Reid: Thank you. (he laughs) I know less about the manufacturing history. John Deere, for instance, ends up in Grand Detour, Illinois in the 1830s. So he's one of these New Englanders—I'm almost positive he came from New England—who ends up going out there as a blacksmith and realizes that there could be a slight shift in technology with the plowshare, and they might be more effective in cutting the sod. So his company emerged out of a very practical need. He's not unique in that; there were quite literally hundreds of these guys out there that were trying to patent things that would serve the particular needs of Illinois farmers. And towns like Grand Detour and then eventually I want to say Peoria, other companies emerge in. Decatur had dozens of these little ag manufacturing operations. So did Chicago. It's really the fifties and the rail—1850s—and the growth in railroads in Chicago that makes it the central hub, but agricultural manufacturing was much more diverse, and of the smaller scale, and more pervasive before the industrialization of the late nineteenth century, anyway.

Maniscalco: What is it about Illinois that kind of has facilitated these people to... I guess there's got to be something with Illinois agriculture specifically that is allowing these other people, like John Deere, like McCormick and some of these other inventors, to come out with these different practices and different experimental farms. So what is it about Illinois, if you were to speculate?

Reid: Well, I think it's a combination of a port—the Port of Chicago—and the access that the lakes gave to international markets. You go to Alberta, Canada, and you'll find equipment that comes out Chicago. Go to Russia; you'll find Ford tractors. Granted, not Illinois tractors, but you'll find Illinois-manufactured equipment of various sorts. So there was an international trade route. And the newspaper accounts of Chicago and ag manufacturing indicates that it was the largest exporter in the world of this ag—well, "in the world"—in the United States—let's not go too elaborate—of agricultural technology. And this is true throughout most of the twentieth century. It's much

complicated by war and such. We could go a whole day on discussing that. (he laughs) So the actual port is critical.

The Mississippi River is something else that allowed export to a whole other part of the nation, and through the Gulf of Mexico, another part of the world. So markets existed for what the Illinois farmers produced, and that allowed them, theoretically, the capital that they could buy the equipment to produce it and to produce more.

Add to that, we're in the middle of the corn belt, and there's topographically, climatologically, you know, this is the best part of the world to grow corn, theoretically. McLean County leads the world in bushels-per-acre production, or it has for many years in the past. So I think that it's a combination of a zone of incredibly fertile land, perfectly climatologically positioned, different access to markets, different markets, transportation diversity.

Maniscalco: There's just a lot of factors that evolve and kind of met at this one spot, and it's kind of interesting.

Reid: Yeah. Look at Iowa for comparison, or even Indiana. Indiana's soil is just not consistently as good as Illinois' soil generally. And you could say, "Well, it has lake access," and Michigan, good heavens, but it's not an agricultural state to the same degree because of the soil varieties. Iowa might be the best comparison, but it doesn't have the lake access; you know, it's landlocked except for the Mississippi. So I think you have to look at Illinois and the way things radiate out of it, and that's the secret.

Maniscalco: That's very interesting. We were looking at some of the pictures you brought in and the maps that you brought in. You were showing us your family's original homestead and things like that. And you know, there's a lot of families that came to Illinois that homesteaded. You had these small, diversified family farms, just as you've explained to us about your family, and those are kind of shrinking. They're starting to disappear. How is that making you feel?

Reid: Well, that's a good question. The farming operation my cease to exist, but the land is still there, so then what do you do with it? I said when you get rid of cattle, the woods grow up, the pastures sometimes do too, the fences are gone. To put those farms back in operation would require a lot of investment, and it's easier to just let a tenant rent it and make it total-crop, which is what we've done with the arable land on both farms. I have no easy answer, in terms of what the future holds, but I would say that it's not a new development now; it's something that's been going on since, well, the enclosure movement in England, way back in Jethro Tull's day, in the mid- to late 1700s, was a crisis in the culture of agriculture.

And the Golden Age of Agriculture prompted the same kind of thing. A lot of these small farms ceased to exist because people had capital, they could buy more land; they tear down the houses and the barns that were there, and they expand their operation. And that's just a sort of consistent change that's been happening since the late twentieth century. The land that I'm part of down in southern Illinois does not lend itself to large-scale production because it's too uneven, too rocky, too clay-y, too non-fertile. It's a good place for cattle. And that's another type of agriculture, and without fencing, you can't run cattle.

Maniscalco: So what do you think the future is for these small family farms?

Reid: (laughs, pause) Well, if I was told tomorrow that I had no choice but to go back to the farm, the first thing I would do is re fence, and I would go back to places like Soulard Market in St. Louis and other members of the slow food movement, and I'd try to put together contracts. It's like with any other investment in agriculture, sometimes the return is not immediate. And for cattle, you're looking at two years before you'll get a prime beef to market. But I think that would be the way that that farm could save itself. But you'd have to go into some serious debt to redo it—refencing. But the land is still there, the pastures could be reclaimed, reseeded.

Maniscalco: You said you would try to go make contracts with the slow food movement, things like that. I guess I'm kind of picking up that you would say that small farmers need to find a niche, like a special area or...?

Reid: Given the economy before the last, say, four to eight years, I think there was hope for more small farmers to take that approach. I think the current economic crisis... With fewer people having the kinds of disposable income to sustain niche markets, I think there is a limit to the number of small farmers that could look for salvation through market gardens or even organic operations. I think that some of the developments now, a lot of farmers think their salvation is corn. And I don't know when, but at some point, people are going to realize that corn is one of the most inefficient sources of ethanol there is. And people can always transfer fairly easily to soybeans from corn. But I think that there's too much inflexibility built into modern, large-scale agriculture. And I think that there's, at least in diversified agriculture, more flexibility built in. And I've always believed that flexibility was key to survival in agriculture. But I am not ag planner or engineering expert. I don't know about all the market projections. I don't think I'd be effective as an agriculture businessman because I think I look at agriculture more as a way of life and a vocation?—no, an avocation as opposed to a vocation. And I listen to the kids at U of I talk about—you know, their research papers, what they write about, and what they talk about, and it's funny because they're caught in this, too, between thinking about their farm family and their culture as part of farm and rural life, and yet they're the most aggressive businesspeople that I have met, totally driven by futures and things that frankly are beyond their

control. And I mean, I just don't know enough to have any reasonable sense of what the outcome will be to the larger-scale producers.

Maniscalco: You've mentioned it a couple times, about the economy and this big focus on corn, for example. And with your experience with history and agricultural history especially, how do you think... This is a real different time for agriculture right now. How do you think it's going to be looked at in the future? Do you have any speculation on that?

Reid: The historian pleads ignorance on the future. (both laugh) Very uncomfortable talking about the future. Even the present gives me pause in terms of thinking, "Well, what if...?" A couple years ago, I said that if these ethanol plants that were cooperatively owned, out of coops, for example, could look to the interests of farmers in their area—their members—even if they're Farm Bureau–owned and operated—that they could think in terms of serving a niche and having the byproducts of the production go back into stock in the area, I think that there's viability there, and I think that you could, in fact, look at corn or soybeans as a huge resource and a sustainable fuel source. And yet, then one of the kids at U of I wrote a paper about how his family's invested in railroads, and they haul corn up from Texas for their ethanol plant. Like Texas? Good heavens. (he laughs) So I think people think beyond their place, meaning their geographic place, too much. And maybe I'm just a traditionalist and I think that place and proximity matters, but I really believe that if you look to the vicinity, you'll find answers. And that's not what ag science, I think, teaches. Some ag science doesn't teach that.

So in terms of the present and the future, I would like to see a lot more diversity in the discussions about agriculture. I'd like to see people prove that small-scale is viable or that niche markets are viable. And I'd like them to do that in visible places, like the *Prairie Farmer*, for example, where you see a lot of emphasis on larger-scale monoculture. Wineries and market gardens—we know they're viable, but so many of these kids, they don't see that as their future. And I wish more of them would, because if they've already got an operation, they have a greater likelihood of being able to continue the operation. It's almost impossible for the fellow who's not already somehow associated with a farming family to break into it because of the capital intensity of it. So I don't think that answered your question, but...

Maniscalco: No, that's great. That's great. I have one last question to ask you, and it's the question everybody gets asked, and that's that this is an oral history interview, and this is going to be archived and kept for a long, long time, and maybe one of your students might be in the Illinois State Museum, and they might come across and say, "Hey, look, there's Dr. Reid." Is there something you would want to leave in here for them, or for your family, or somebody...?

Reid: Well, I mean, my family was my past, and they made me who I am, and the students are the future. So I don't expect anybody to listen to what I've said,

either in the classroom or on the tape, and just assume that it's gospel. The idea is they take it, they think, "Oh, a kernel of something I'm interested in knowing more about," and they begin to think about it themselves—to look into things more, to consider alternative views. It doesn't mean that their view is wrong, but just that there are alternatives, and lots of other life experiences out there that prove fascinating and worth knowing about.

Maniscalco: Great. Well, thank you very much for doing the interview.

Reid: Yeah, thank you very much.

Maniscalco: It was a lot of fun.

Reid: I enjoyed it. (he laughs) Yeah, thank you.

(end of interview)