# Interview with Edward VanDrunen

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Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco



Maniscalco: Today is June 17, 2008. We're sitting in the office of Ed VanDrunen in Momence, Illinois for the oral history of Illinois agriculture project. How are you doing today, Ed?

VanDrunen: Very good, thank you.

Maniscalco: Great, great. I'm going to ask you some real easy questions first.

VanDrunen: Oh, that's good!

Maniscalco: We'll get you warmed up! (laughter) All right. So how about age, date of birth, and where you were born?

VanDrunen: I'm 72, May 20, 1936, and born in South Holland, Illinois.

Maniscalco: South Holland, Illinois. Now, is that where...? Were most of your family living around that area at that time, or...?

VanDrunen: Yes, right. So yeah, originally my great-grandfather was from Holland, so I'm fourth generation in this country, so they moved to that area when they came from Holland.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow! So then how did they get to here in Momence?

VanDrunen: We farmed in South Holland, and as it became a suburban town the farms moved further south, so we started farming here in Momence when I was out of college, so we moved really from truck farming or vegetable farming in South Holland to Momence.

Maniscalco: Okay. Now, you said your grandparents came from where again? From Holland?

VanDrunen: Right.

Maniscalco: And did they come directly to Illinois, or...?

VanDrunen: Yes.

Maniscalco: Really?! Wow. Do you have any memories of why they came?

VanDrunen: Oh, why?

Maniscalco: Yeah.

VanDrunen: Not really, just that probably there were people emigrating into America at that time from other countries, also, so there was a lot of inward immigration, I think, from European countries those years.

Maniscalco: Now, do you think it was a natural progression for them to just go into agriculture?

VanDrunen: I kind of think so, yeah.

Maniscalco: So you grew up in South Holland with your immediate family around. That would be your parents, grandparents; any aunts and uncles?

VanDrunen: Yes, I had an uncle who farmed with me when my father retired, or he was seventeen years older than my uncle and he had nephritis or kidney problems, and he retired fairly young because of his health, so I began farming with my uncle, who was seventeen years older than I was, and he was seventeen years younger than my father, so he was in between.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow! (laughter)

VanDrunen: So that's kind of how it went.

Maniscalco: Now, did you have any other uncles or aunts in the area, or...?

VanDrunen: I had an aunt, too, right.

Maniscalco: Do you have any memories of her?

VanDrunen: Yes, right. She lived also in South Holland. Her husband had died quite young, so she had—I had cousins from that side of the family that I grew up with, in a way. So yeah, I had all good memories of family.

Maniscalco: So you mentioned that your cousins and your aunt and your uncle... Can we talk a little bit about your childhood in South Holland and how it was growing up on the farm?

VanDrunen: Right. So it was a vegetable farm, and we had cows and horses, one cow, two horses usually. So when I grew up we were still farming with horses. Tractors were just coming in, so we also had some tractors. My uncle and farther were

produce farmers. They grew mainly onion sets which were planted for gardens and for seed, so they would harvest them in the fall, and they were stored over the winter and sold in the spring for onion sets, set up onions, so that was their main crop, but we also grew some sugar beets. Tomatoes were grown in the area, red beets... When I was young, we had hay and so on for cattle, the horses and cows, so they had some hay farming. So it was produce grown also for the Chicago market, South Water market things were grown for so my Grandpa would go to market with things. They grew some potatoes at that time. So it was vegetable farming for the people in Chicago, mainly, when I grew up, and the onion set business.

Maniscalco: Interesting. So now being a child on the farm, I'm sure you had chores.

VanDrunen: Right. So yeah, we had chickens, and I had to feed the chickens in the morning and get the eggs at night. We had to do some feeding horses and the cows, you know. It was one cow, so my father always milked the cow in the morning and evening. Other than that, we used to have a couple other cattle, some steers that we butchered for meat. That was about the animals that we had, so it wasn't about the animals but there were dogs and cats and chickens and pretty well typical farm in a way at that time.

Maniscalco: So you had plenty of pets! (laughter)

VanDrunen: Yes, right.

Maniscalco: So what were some of your favorite chores, then?

VanDrunen: Yeah, our job was to take care of the chickens. We had to get the eggs out, and we had more eggs than we used in the family so we sold some eggs, and we had to pack 'em in, you know, cartons or bags and people come and get 'em. We sold some milk; we had more milk, again, than we needed, but not that much. And I had work in the fields, so in the summer we weeded, so as number of kids, you see, cousins weeded the fields and worked in the fields. Harvesting onion sets was a dirty job, dusty, and we had to help with that. Some of it was done by hand at first, and later on it was more mechanized, harvesters. Onion sets were stored in crates. They were put in crates in a warehouse. They came into the warehouse and were stored in the warehouse, but they had to be cleaned and sorted and so on, too. So that was done, some of it, in the winter, and we had to help with that, too.

Maniscalco: What was the one chore that you just did not want to do?

VanDrunen: Oh, I don't know! (laughter) I can't really say. We had to clean the barn some, you know, manure. We had to clean out the stalls, and it wasn't particularly liked, and same thing with the chicken coops. They had to be cleaned every so often; every two or three months we had to clean the chicken coop and put new straw in and so on.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned a lot about your cousins already being around. What about any other friends? Did you have a lot of other friends around the farm and playing?

VanDrunen: Yeah, there were, you know, there were neighbor kids around, so yeah, we played ball in the pasture, so they came over quite a bit or we went there. They weren't really close. They were, you know, in our—compared to now where people live close, this was a quarter mile away, so... But that was no problem walking or taking your bike and seeing other kids in the area.

Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned playing ball. What other games did you play?

VanDrunen: Baseball and football. We played softball, twelve-inch softball mostly, but football. Not much soccer then, but those are the really... Mostly twelve-inch softball and football.

Maniscalco: What positions?

VanDrunen: I used to pitch, mainly, some, but all positions, so... And when you played out in the pasture you just kind of rotated around, so you'd get five or six kids and play ball. So when we got older and played in school and so on, then you had regular teams and so on, but we were just kids. Just whoever you could get together and play.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Great. Now they have 4H and FFA programs and organizations; did you have any organizations like that when you were in school?

VanDrunen: No, I wouldn't say so. No, not that I know of.

Maniscalco: So farm work, we could kind of say, would seem more as farm work and not a thing to learn about.

VanDrunen: Right.

Maniscalco: So most of your learning was done on the farm. Do you have memories of learning about farm activities with your father or having him show you things?

VanDrunen: Yeah, but you learn probably more by experience. Just doing it, you are working, really, so I started working on the farm when I was seventh, eighth grade in school. So we really kind of worked all summer. I would say starting about the sixth or seventh grade.

Maniscalco: Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

VanDrunen: I have one brother who is two years older and my sister was four years younger.

Maniscalco: Now, did your brother work on the farm with you, as well?

VanDrunen: Right….

Maniscalco: And how about your sister?

VanDrunen: She did too, yeah. I don't think as much, maybe, as my brother and I, but girls, you know, worked around the house more, maybe not in—while we had to work in the field, so a little bit different, yeah.

Maniscalco: Interesting. What about church? Was church really involved in your life?

VanDrunen: Yes, we were very active in church. We didn't work on Sundays. There was really no Sunday work, and pretty much everybody in the community went to church on Sunday, so we belonged to a Christian Reform church, and we went usually twice a Sunday. When I was little, they also had services in the afternoon which were in Dutch. We still had Dutch services when I was real small, so I can remember going to Dutch service, too.

Maniscalco: Really? So were you able to understand the Dutch?

VanDrunen: No, very little. My Grandpa, who was born in this country, he spoke a lot, you know, Dutch quite a bit, so I learned a little from him, and my mother and father could speak Dutch well, but no, I never really learned it very well. Not really at all, just know a few words.

Maniscalco: Interesting. What other kinds of Dutch customs would you say that your family has in comparison to some of the neighbors and everybody else around?

VanDrunen: Probably not too much when I was growing up. We were pretty well Americanized. We went to private school, Christian school, and it was a Dutch community so mainly Dutch people. Cultural-wise, you know, there was things that probably we ate that were from a Dutch background, but otherwise not much. We were pretty well Americanized. I would say that there was a lot, every ethnic group, you know, if you're Italian or Polish or German has some distinctive things, and the same with the Dutch community, but not that we weren't... Pretty much, you know, if you know the language and everybody speaks English, so we were really Americanized.

Maniscalco: So, you know, you said you went to a private school. Where did you go to school, first of all?

VanDrunen: It was a school in South Holland, and we lived a mile out of town, just on the edge of town. A good mile... Well, about a mile. So the school was about a mile away, a good mile away. So we went to school there. It was right in town, the school was.

Maniscalco: Now, there were town kids and country kids going to the same school?

VanDrunen: Mm-hmm.

Maniscalco: Do you remember any kind of, you know, conflicts between country and town kids, or...?

VanDrunen: No, really not at all.

Maniscalco: There was just no difference between...?

VanDrunen: Not really, no. It was a farming community, but there was, you know, a lot of kids that lived in town. Some of their parents worked in factories and so on around in the area. Harvey was a close, which is a manufacturing town. There's a lot of industry in Harvey. Some people worked there, but there was also carpenters and plumbers, so all different kind of trade backgrounds kids came from. On the edge of the suburbs of Chicago, there's a farming community [South Holland] on the edge of Chicago, metropolitan Chicago, so we're thirty miles south of Chicago so it wasn't that far from the city, and same thing, there was farm produce sold to Chicago and so on.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned before your grandfather going in to sell at the markets in Chicago. Do you have any memories of going to Chicago to sell at the markets?

VanDrunen: Some I did, you know. We'd go to South Water Market and take some products there. When I started farming, we raised chives and we potted chives and we took potted chives to Chicago. Onion sets were sold at the markets in Chicago, South Water Market, so I remember, you know, going there with produce some. My grandfather would go with the horse and wagon, and they would quite often leave in the afternoon and then he would sleep overnight in a tavern, and then they would the produce in the market early in the morning and come back the next day, so that was a two-day trip to Chicago at that time when he used to tell me about that.

Maniscalco: That's cool. So for somebody who's never been to the market in Chicago, can you explain what it's like?

VanDrunen: Yeah, markets are very busy. You know, they open usually two or three in the morning—South Water Market did. There's a lot of produce coming in when I was young that mostly came in by truck, some by rail, but the rail cars were unloaded a ways away, so from all over the country produce would come in and the buyers would be there from restaurants and stores, and most of the produce was handled through South Water Market for the city of Chicago for a long time, and it was very, very busy, particularly when trucks started to come in. It had been built, really, for the horse and buggy age, and when semis started coming in it was very crowded and very congested, and a very interesting place for young kids! (laughter)

Maniscalco: (laughter) So who set the prices then, you know?

VanDrunen: They were just, it was a free market, you know, whatever... The prices varied a great deal at the Chicago market. If anything was short the price went up very quickly, and if it was over-supply it went down very quickly, so it was a free market, really. So prices were adjusted rapidly.

Maniscalco: Now, did your family or does your family have friends that are in the Chicago market from then that, you know...?

VanDrunen: We did. We had some that we knew that worked on the market. So yeah, they weren't close friends but good acquaintances, some of them. We sold potatoes in the fall of the year where people would store potatoes in their basement for the winter. Mostly they came from Idaho and North Dakota, and my parents, my uncle and my father had a business selling potatoes in the fall. They were bought by train, they'd come in by train carloads, and we'd buy a car of potatoes and it would come into South Holland. It would unload them and sell them to local people, and people would store potatoes for the winter in their cellars, so in the fall, usually in October, for a month we would sell potatoes. And then they, my uncle and my father, would go to market every day and look at carloads of potatoes that were coming in, and buy them, and it was up to twenty carloads of potatoes they would sell in the fall. So we used to go to the potato market in the morning, and you'd have to get up at two o'clock if you wanted to go along, and they would go into the cars of potatoes and inspect the potatoes, and then it would be, you know, bartering on the price. If you decided what car of potatoes you were interested in then you bartered on the price on the potato market.

Maniscalco: Now, I'm sure your father and grandfather were going off to the market and they were selling all their product; were they ever bringing any kind of special things or different things back from the market.

VanDrunen: Yeah, some. You know, when you're at market they would buy a box of grapes or peaches or apples, so we always had a lot of fruits and vegetables because when they went to market they would take things back.

Maniscalco: How often were they going to market then?

VanDrunen: When I was going to market not every day, but they would go a few times a week probably.

Maniscalco: That's very interesting. Now, when did you really start taking over the farm from your father?

VanDrunen: I went to college, went to the University of Illinois. First I went one year to college in Michigan, Calvin College, and then to University of Illinois. I took agriculture, horticulture really, so I had planned on going into the nursery business, so I studied really for horticulture at the University of Illinois. When

I came out of school I went on one year, got my Masters Degree in horticulture, and then I came home and I started farming with my uncle. I had planned to go into the nursery business, and we planted some nursery stock, but I also took over the onion set farming that my father retired from at the same time, which we grew some nursery stock and we were doing the vegetable farming, onion set farming also. At that same time, we started growing some chives, which was for a farmer in Florida who was potting chives and growing chives in Florida, and they wouldn't over winter in Florida or over summer, they wouldn't go through the summer because it was too hot, so they would buy chive roots. We were shipping them to Florida, and he was planting them out for the winter crop, chives. That's when we started harvesting some of our own chives, taking them to market, potting them, taking them to market, and also freezing them for the dairy industry where they were using them for cottage cheese. That's really how we started in the herb business, and it got so we had to decide, you know, whether we were going to stay in the herb business in farming or go in the nursery business, so we were doing both for a while, but we dropped really the nursery business and went in the herb business. As we raised more and more herbs—and the main crop was chives first—we started selling them frozen first, and also the fresh market, and then we started freeze-drying them. Freeze-drying chives was just beginning, and we were shipping them out to be freeze-dried as a dried product, which was sold to spice companies and dairies and other food manufacturers. And from there we started getting our own driers. Once we had our own driers, then we started doing more herbs, but also we started drying other fruits and vegetables, which we purchased, usually frozen. So the business grew from there, and once we started doing our own drying it grew, you know, fairly rapidly, and particularly got into other fruits and vegetables.

Maniscalco: What year would you say you kind of made that decision, we're going to go strictly to growing herbs?

VanDrunen: I would say around 1965, right in there. So it was kind of a transition for a number of years there, so we phased out of the nursery business, which we had started, and went in [-to herbs] more and more to... You know, also we dropped the growing onion sets maybe ten years later. We grew a few other vegetable crops, cabbage and so on for a while, but slowly on we got out of the vegetable crops and into the herbs, so we ended up growing just the herbs, and really no other vegetable crops.

Maniscalco: So now what did you do for the nursery business? What were you growing in the nursery business?

VanDrunen: That was trees and shrubs, evergreens, which we sold to landscapers mainly, and so we had built that up somewhat. We also purchased some other nursery, bald and burlap, the nursery products that we sold to landscapers, so we did some of that also. So we phased out of that, too, after a while.

Maniscalco: Now, you kind of gave us a picture of your father's farm, which was very diverse with lots of livestock and some different crops and things like that. Can you give us kind of a picture of what the farm looks like now?

VanDrunen: Now we're just growing just herbs, almost all the culinary herbs, thyme and oregano and basil, cilantro, growing some onion tops, dill, mint... Oregano did I say? Maybe I said oregano. So really all the culinary herbs that are used for cooking. We're freezing them and we're selling some frozen, and we're drying them, we're selling some freeze-dried. Also some air dried, but that's minor. So it's mostly frozen and freeze-dried, and those are big fields. We're farming about a thousand acres. They're harvested all summer and we have to put up enough to supply customers year-round, so we store enough to carry us through the winter for supplying customers. Most of those are harvested a number of times, two or three times. Cilantro is usually harvested twice in the spring and twice in the fall. Basil will be harvested six, seven times during the summer, so even though it's a thousand acres it's more than a thousand acres that are harvested because there's multiple harvests. Most all the herbs.

Maniscalco: So you have a thousand acres, and where is the thousand acres from here? I mean, is it in one spot?

VanDrunen: Right, they're all within ten miles, so we're farming four or five places but within a ten mile radius so most of it's closer than that, but that's the farthest out.

Maniscalco: Now, your father's place wasn't that large so kind of over time you've accumulated all this land that you're farming now.

VanDrunen: Right, mm-hmm.

Maniscalco: You know, what was that process?

VanDrunen: We still rent some, but most of it we're farming our own ground so that slowly over time we purchase some ground and added to it, and most of it's irrigated so we have more of it out of wells, some out of the Kankakee River but most of it out of wells. Because it's a high value crop, it's kind of important to irrigate so you don't lose crops.

Maniscalco: Now, your father's type of farming was completely different than herb farming. What did, you know, what were some of his comments about going into the herb business and things like that?

VanDrunen: It was somewhat different, but onion set farming was specialized farming, in a way, so it was a specialized crop, more than most other, so... And herbs are a specialized crop, so some ways they were different but some ways they were similar, too, in that sense. Both of what we're doing is pretty specialized crops.

Maniscalco: His comments?

VanDrunen: He died really before we—we were just going into the herb business in a way when he died, so he was, you know, he encouraged me to do it.

Maniscalco: So he was encouraging about a lot of it.

VanDrunen: Right.

Maniscalco: Okay. Now, would you go to him for advice about, you know, this is something I'm looking into, Dad? What do you think?

VanDrunen: Yeah, some. Again, he was sixty-two when he died, so he wasn't that old, so he was more active in my younger life than when I started the transition really into the herb farming.

Maniscalco: Now, you also mentioned that you have an older brother. Is he involved in the farm or was he involved in the farm?

VanDrunen: No. He was when he grew up with me. He became a dentist, he went to dental school, so he was a dentist, so no, he wasn't active in the farming after he went to college.

Maniscalco: Now, was it kind of an idea that one of the sons in your family was going to be on the farm, you know, for your father? Was...?

VanDrunen: Not necessarily. I think our father somewhat encouraged it, but no, there was no pressure at all to go into farming, so he left that pretty well up to us. Same thing with my brother, so it would've been fine with him if he wanted a farm, I think, but no, there was no pressure on either one of us to farm either.

Maniscalco: Now, why, I mean, here your brother went into dentistry; why did you go into farming? (laughter) It's a big question!

VanDrunen: (laughter) That's a big question, yeah! I don't know, really. I liked it, I guess, but no particular reason otherwise. But I chose to go into agriculture, where he didn't, so...

Maniscalco: Now, you did mention that you do have a very specialized crop, and I'd like to talk a little bit more about that, and first of all, what does it take to grow herbs? I mean, are there special machinery that's involved?

VanDrunen: There are, so it's mostly all mechanically harvested. When we first began chives it was maybe, it was all hand harvested so it was quite labor intensive, and it still is, but now it's all mechanically harvested, so we made machinery that would harvest chives and other herbs. So it's become much more mechanized than it was then, so as time, the machinery grew with the

processing and the harvesting, so it's harvested quite a bit different where it was all hand harvested at one time.

Maniscalco: So what types of, what exactly are the machines that you're using to harvest?

VanDrunen: Basically there's two: there's a machine that cuts chives, that just takes one row at a time and cuts them off, the circular blades that cut them off at the ground, and then they go up a belt and they're taken and laid in the boxes where they used to be cut by a knife by hand and laid into boxes. The other machine is a sickle machine that cuts herbs off just about the ground. These are for basil and thyme and oregano and cilantro, so almost all the other herbs are cut with a sickle, and they go on a belt and the belt goes, puts them in a wagon, so they're harvested in wagons and the wagons are pulled in from the field, and then they're unloaded and they're washed and go through cutters usually, and then they're frozen, and then boxed up, and then... Or go into trays, and they go into the driers where they're freeze-driers. So some of them are freeze-dried, some of them are sold frozen. So we sell quite a bit of frozen as well as dried. Frozen are used in [products] where they use wet mixes like they use basil in spaghetti and they'll use cilantro in salsas for tomato salsa and Spanish or Mexican food are used a lot. Dried are used for spice companies where they'll, you know, bottle it for dried spices, so freeze-drying is a better way of dehydrating or drying than air drying or dehydrating. It's a little better quality product, but it's more expensive also, so it's the higher end of the dried market.

Maniscalco: Let's talk... Do you have to rotate these crops, or...?

VanDrunen: Right. We try to, yeah, so usually a field will [have] summer annuals or perennials that come up every year, chives, so thyme and tarragon and oregano are perennials that come up every year. The others are annuals that are planted every year: basil, dill, thyme—no, not thyme, but cilantro—are annual crops, and they're grown as annuals. The perennials we try to rotate every four or five years, and the annuals we try to rotate every year, you know, so we'll put a different crop on wherever we can.

Maniscalco: Now, do you have to use a fertilizer?

VanDrunen: Yes, we fertilize. 'Cause these are leafy crops, they take quite a bit of nitrogen. But yeah, we fertilize regular, we test the soil, and try to add whatever we need to grow a crop well.

Maniscalco: Who's doing the testing of the soil? Are you doing it? Particularly here, or...?

VanDrunen: We take the samples and send them into a soil lab that tests them.

Maniscalco: Now I'm sure with all their fertilizer and everything else that the herbs aren't the only things growing; there's got to be quite a few weeds out there. How are you dealing with the weeds?

VanDrunen: Weeds are always a problem, particularly in vegetable crops, so we do quite a bit of hand weeding. We're also using some herbicides. They're restricted on minor crops because many of the herbicides aren't approved for minor crops where they are for major crops, but slowly on there's more and more of them being approved, but that's a long process, so we're fairly restricted on what we can use.. We have to stay within the approved herbicides that have been approved for herbs, and that isn't a whole lot, and there was, for a while there was hardly any, but now there's a few more. See, there was herbicides approved for onions but they might not be approved for chives, even though they're very similar, but it takes the research, and the chemical companies have to do the research to get them FDA approved, and that takes time and is expensive, so where there's a lot of herbicides, or quite a few more at least for major crops than there are for minor crops, so that's one of the problems with minor crops.

Maniscalco: Are there any other differences between major and minor crops like this with the herbicides?

VanDrunen: Again, there's less research probably being done for minor crops, and they're more labor intense, but otherwise—and growing somewhat different, but... And your marketing's quite a bit different. We're selling to food manufacturers mainly, so it sells wholesale, but we have to call on our customers directly, so we call on most all the major food companies and sell them frozen and dried herbs and other products, so we're also doing most all the fruits and vegetables, so... That grew as the business grew. We've covered other crops. So that's a little different than the farming side of the business, although it's the same customers many times. The herbs were growing, the fruits and vegetables for buying and drying them.

Maniscalco: Now, as you said, your customers are a little different. Who are some of your customers?

VanDrunen: Kraft and McCormick and Uncle Ben's and a lot of bakeries, cereal companies, so just about everybody in the food industry, people that make pizzas and almost all processed food companies, which are all the major food companies.

Maniscalco: Now, I mean, let's say somebody owned a bakery or some kind of food company and they wanted to purchase your product; how do they get to do that?

VanDrunen: We have about six or seven people that are selling, that are calling on major companies. They, you know, we're listed as ingredient suppliers so people will call us, too, for ingredients that they want, so it works kind of both ways, some through getting your name known. Food shows, we go to food shows. So you try to get to know the buyers at major companies, and some through research, you know, you work with the research people in major companies

and supply them with samples and so on and so they will look at your products.

Maniscalco: Interesting. To kind of come back to the crops that you're growing, what about insects? I'm sure, I mean, herbs taste good (laughter) and not just to us, so how, you know, how are you dealing with insects and things?

VanDrunen: Insects aren't a big problem in herb crops.

Maniscalco: Really?

VanDrunen: Less, probably, than a lot of other vegetable crops. Since there aren't really any insecticides approved, or very little, for minor crops we do really very little or almost really no spraying for insecticides. We do get some bugs in the cleaning, in the washing, and so on. We can get most of the insects out of the food product. Food companies are very fussy nowadays about insects in their products. They don't want any, so we have to be very careful we don't get any insects in our herbs we're selling. So they go through a tumbler, a screen tumbler, which insects fall out of, so we clean most of them out that way. And in the crop itself, insects aren't a big problem—and herbs—so that's one of the benefits of herbs. Insects aren't... Weeds are a much bigger problem than insects. We have some problem, but it's not a major problem, so we really do no spraying for insects.

Maniscalco: What types of insects are you trying to get rid of when you're washing and tumbling all these herbs exactly?

VanDrunen: Some of them are good insects like ladybugs and so on. People don't like ladybugs and so on; people don't like ladybugs (laughter) even though they're eating other insects. There's some spiders, there's ladybugs, there's grasshoppers, just a regular garden. There's some thrip and aphids, but they're minor in herb crops. We don't have a whole lot of insect problems. Weed problems are much worse. We are growing some organic; about 25% of what we grow is organic, and what's organic we can't use fertilizer, insecticides, or pesticides on that at all. So we have to deal with growing stuff organically, or we're able to, anyway, so we do grow some organic.

Maniscalco: How did you come to that decision of growing some of your crop organic and some of it not?

VanDrunen: Partly it was because you weren't allowed to use, there were no approved insecticides or herbicides for herbs, so we partly did it for that reason. We thought if we can't use anything anyway... The problem we really run into mainly with organic is fertilizer; there's very little fertilizer you can use. You can't use any chemical fertilizer, so it becomes more and more difficult to farm without any fertilizer. We used to use some manure but it's being much more restrictive on using manure. The organic people don't want you to use what they call factory manure that comes out of a chicken farm or a pig farm,

so natural manure is very limited. So there really is very little fertilizer in the organic industry right now, so the biggest problem with growing organically is lack of fertilizer, and it's a serious problem, I think, for organic growers 'cause they have really no good source of fertilizer, and it's difficult particularly on herb crops to grow without nitrogen because they're leafy products. But it is difficult in all herb crops, or all crops, really, because of the lack of fertilizer in organics. So the big restriction on the organic business I think is lack of fertilizer, no good fertilizer. There was a time when there was, everybody had cows and horses and everybody had some fertilizer, but nowadays there's just large chicken farms and large dairy farms and large hog farms, and if you can't use the fertilizer from those, the manure from those, you're restricted on what you can use.

Maniscalco: It's got to be kind of frustrating! (laughter)

VanDrunen: Well, that's one of the problems. There's a lot of interest in organic growing, and I think there's problems with... The problem with the industry is people mainly don't want to use the chemicals, they're worried about the chemical part of it, but by restricting the use of fertilizer, that there is no really a good source of fertilizer anymore, it's going to hurt the organic industry, and I don't see any way how they're going to get around that issue, because the problem is on factory farms they're mostly using chemicals and so on, so most of the chicken farmers are using some non-organic products and growing, same thing with hog, dairy farms and all those. So it's a major problem for organics which, I think, somewhere they have to deal with, but I don't know how they're going to.

Maniscalco: It will be interesting to see! (laughter)

VanDrunen: Yes! (laughter)

Maniscalco: Now, it seems like this is a very fitting question it being timing it with all the floods that are going on around: How about drainage on your land? Do you have problems with that?

VanDrunen: Some. We just had close to six inches of rain here so we lost some crop. Maybe 20% of the fields got drowned out, so it's pretty severe in our area, and we had crops that were ready harvest so it wasn't the best time right now for growing, and it was a very, it's an unusually heavy rain we had this year. You don't get a six inch rain very often, so it's unusual. And the ditches and everything else filled up, so it was hard to get the water off, so... One of the problems with farming, you deal with the weather. It's either too dry or too wet! (laughter)

Maniscalco: So do you have tiling, or...?

VanDrunen: Some. We have some fields that have some tile. Some, you know, ditches and... It just normally, on a normal year we're in good shape for drainage. It's

when you get an unusual rain or unusual year which doesn't happen that often, but we just had to go through one just now because of the heavy rain.

Maniscalco: Yeah. So, you know, you just had this heavy rain and you lost a good chunk of your crop; how are you planning to deal with that?

VanDrunen: We replant, so because we're planting really all year, all summer round, we'll plant crops, so we'll compensate somewhat by replanting fields, but we just lose... As I said, we harvest most crops six, seven times so we lost one harvest, I would say, or two harvests on it. We can make a lot of that up. So somewhat it's difficult but it's not unsolvable in a way.

Maniscalco: Okay. Now, you've kind of explained that you're bringing these crops in and you chop 'em up and you, you know, kind of clean them off and then you're freeze drying them, or you mentioned a little bit about air drying. I'm wondering if you could kind of talk a little bit about the storage process.

VanDrunen: Okay. Once it's dried, it'll keep probably about a year, you know; shelf life is at least a year, a little longer, but right around a year. We try not to keep anything over a year, so it's dried storage, so we have a big warehouse where we can store and ship out of. Frozen, it's the same way, but that has to go in frozen storage. We store it in a local frozen food storage facility and it's shipped out of there frozen, or out of our own warehouse here as dried, so we're shipping out of this building for dried and the frozen warehouse for frozen.

Maniscalco: Where is the frozen warehouse? Where's that?

VanDrunen: That's about five miles away, so that's just stored there and they fill the orders there. A lot of it goes out by truckloads, some smaller, less than truckloads. Dried, it's the same, a lot of it goes out by truckloads. Some of that also goes by smaller—the bakeries will order smaller quantities, some even United Parcel, you know, for small orders, so shipping is a number of different ways, and so we ship every day, and so quite a bit of product goes out every day.

Maniscalco: What's a large shipment?

VanDrunen: A truckload is 40,000 pounds, so that's about as large as, you know... Usually people don't order more than a truckload at a time, but that's quite common.

Maniscalco: What is the, I mean, it's probably hard to put a number on, but how much product are you producing out of here?

VanDrunen: Of herbs, we're producing ten million pounds, so it's a lot, and part of that or a big part of it is frozen. There's also dried, so when I say ten million pounds it's frozen pounds. So, you know, that's a considerable amount of truckloads. Plus we're also doing the other herbs—not herbs, fruits and vegetables which

we're buying, so it's maybe... Of our sales now, herbs are maybe 20% and the other fruits and vegetables are probably 80%.

Maniscalco: Now where are you purchasing the other fruits and vegetables from?

VanDrunen: Pretty well all over, so it depends where they're grown. Get strawberries from California a lot but also from Chile and Poland. Raspberries, same thing. Corn and peas are a lot of it from Oregon and Washington, up in California. Blueberries, a lot from Michigan, some from the Northwest. So it depends where they're growing it, so we'll buy usually frozen from wherever the frozen packers are that are packing it. So broccoli and spinach are grown in different areas, different times of the year, wherever it's grown, really. So it's fairly broad that we're...

Maniscalco: Yeah, now some of the international crops that you're getting in, that's got to be kind of difficult to get it into the United States.

VanDrunen: Somewhat.

Maniscalco: What's the process for doing that?

VanDrunen: You really have to buy them internationally, and, you know, they have to go... They come in in containers, usually frozen. We buy a lot of frozen. So it has to go through your inspections in port. It takes time to get it here. So there's lead time sometimes of fairly long, if they're coming from other countries. So inspections have become more numerous, I'd say, so a lot of crops that are brought in are inspected, so it takes—they are held up in port longer than they used to be, so it's a longer timeframe to get 'em here sometimes.

Maniscalco: Is that making it more difficult for you to do your job, or is it...?

VanDrunen: A little bit, yeah. It's just a time issue; you have to figure more time to get product in from other countries.

Maniscalco: Now, how are you deciding "I want to freeze-dry strawberries" over freeze-dried peas? I mean, how are you making these decisions on what you're going to do?

VanDrunen: Depends on orders and customers. We try to get an idea what a customer's going to use and lead time and so on, so as we dry products, inventory's a problem. So it's a big job keeping inventory reasonable and in line with what customers are going to need. It's expensive to have too much inventory, and customers are very unhappy if you don't have enough inventory, you can't supply them, so that's a job to keep your customers happy and your inventory down.

Maniscalco: So how long, let's say I called up and said I wanted a truckload of peas; how long would it take 'til I got the truckload of peas?

VanDrunen: We would have peas on hand, so we could ship that out pretty quick.

Maniscalco: If it was something you didn't have on hand?

VanDrunen: That would be longer. You know, most fruits and vegetables we carry some inventory, but major like sweet corn and peas we carry fairly large inventories because those are items that we sell a lot of. Those we can, but we also have to know what a customer's going to be taking and using, so you try to keep in contact with your customers, and if you can sometimes we contract, we contract with them that we know what they're going to use, and they say we're going to take so much every month or every couple weeks, so we try to work with them in that way, so it's a lot of customer relationships there.

Maniscalco: You know, I'm noticing that, I mean, you've gone from when you were a child going to the market in Chicago to kind of this international market and this global market. Where's the similarities between the two that you've kind of picked up on? Are there some similarities that just cross boundaries?

VanDrunen: Yeah, it's quite a bit different. We export to, you know; we're selling people in other countries some—not a lot, but do some. We're doing some importing, but we're also doing some exporting, probably about as much of each. The differences? Things are, people are interested in really three things: They're interested in price, in quality, in service, and if you have the best price and the best quality and the best service you'll get all the business! (laughter) But that's very difficult to do. And the other side, if you don't have some of those you'll be out of business, and that's, when you're small or big it really works pretty much the same. You have to give people... They're buying from you because of one or all three of those. They're either buying on price or quality or service; probably quality and service in the long run are more important than price. People will first buy on price, but as you go along they're more interested in quality and service, so those are, basically they stay the same. If you want all the business, you'll get all the business if you have all three! (laughter)

Maniscalco: So what do you do to keep up quality and service?

VanDrunen: All our products go through the lab, so we're testing them, and companies require a lot more quality insurance, I would say, so they want to see your lab results or know that you have them, so you have to test dried product for moisture, for bacteria counts, plate counts, so each lot that we put up and sell we can give spec sheets and tell people what's in it, and so we have about twenty people working in a lab just doing lab work. So it's a big job, just to ensure quality, so we try to do the best we can, and companies are demanding more and more because of lawsuits. They just can't take the chance on having defective products. It's too risky for them, so they demand more and more service in the quality area.

Maniscalco: Now, I'm sure when you started in 1965 you didn't have a lab.

VanDrunen: No.

Maniscalco: When did that start?

VanDrunen: Before long on we used to send samples to the lab, food labs, and have things checked, but as you do more and more of it you have your own lab and you have your own quality control, so that builds up as a business builds. Also, the quality part of it grew, too, and demands have gotten much more stringent, I would say, as the food industry has become more conscious of salmonella and E. Coli, and so companies can't afford to take any chances on food, so our food is much better than it used to be, you know. Our quality of our food I think has gone up a lot, just because it's demanded by the public, and the same thing with pesticides and herbicides. Most of them—our food is very safe, much safer than it was twenty, thirty years ago, I think, because just that wasn't known. We were using pesticides and herbicides; they weren't always the safest, but now they're pretty safe. The control on it is very stringent, in a way, so our food is very good. We hear now, you know, salmonella outbreaks and E. Coli outbreaks. Before you never heard of 'em; people just died of it and nobody knew it, and now if somebody dies of it the whole world knows it. That's the changes that have taken place.

Maniscalco: You know, you've mentioned, and kind of on the same line, you know, the FDA and some of the things that they're requiring. Now, the quality of your product, is that above FDA standards or at FDA standards? How do you, you know, keep in those lines?

VanDrunen: Most of the industry is self-controlled, you know, FDA comes in and checks things and so on, but FDA's mainly checking it when there's problems. They do, you know, do a lot of testing on herbicides and pesticides to make sure they're safe. Those that are approved now are pretty safe and you're not allowed to use unsafe ones, so there's a number of 'em they've taken off the market because they had too much residual effect and too cancer effects and harmful effects, so the ones that are left that we can use I think are, in most cases, fairly safe and they've been tested very well. There's no perfect system, and the FDA can't know everything, either. Nobody can. But they do, I think, a very good job on trying to control quality on fruits and vegetables, our food products.

Maniscalco: And while we're on the topic of the FDA, how do you feel about, you know, government programs?

VanDrunen: Most of them I think are pretty good. Sometimes they're over-restrictive and sometimes under. You know, the problem the government has, they work after the fact many times. When there's an outbreak or something they come in and change it. It's very hard to anticipate the future, and that's a problem the

government has. In some cases they become overly restricted, and people say, "Well, why wasn't this watched?", but you can't predict everything, just like we had a big rainstorm; we said, "Why didn't we know there was six inches of rain coming?" (laughter) Hindsight is perfect! (laughter) So government gets blamed for many things that they can't really control, and maybe because of that they try to control too much I would almost say.

Maniscalco: Now, I noticed you have a good sized family here in the picture behind me. Are any of your sons or daughters involved on the farm?

VanDrunen: Yes, I have two sons that are involved. I have two daughters and two sons, but the two sons are involved in the business. They take care of most of it. I'm getting old and I do less. They're running most of the business now.

Maniscalco: Now, did they go off to school to run this, or...?

VanDrunen: Yes, they both went to college. My oldest son Jeff went to Perdue and he took food technology, and my younger son Kevin went to Illinois and he really majored in business.

Maniscalco: So what's the process of turning over—I mean, this is a big operation with a thousand acres and, you know, all the different products that you're producing; what's kind of the, how are you going about turning it over to your sons?

VanDrunen: So I've worked at turning it over for a number of years, so I've, you know, turned over the interest in the business to them, which takes considerable amount of work and planning. So far, they have control of most of the business now, and that takes a number of years, and it's been worked on, so it's important to work on. Many families and farmer families anyway don't work on it. It's easy to not work on it, but it's very important to do, so I would encourage people, particularly farmers, to work on it, start when they're young before they get too old.

Maniscalco: There must be a little bit of pride in the fact that your sons are both involved in the business.

VanDrunen: There is a great deal, right, and they've done a very good job, so that makes it easier, too. So I have had no problem turning things over to them.

Maniscalco: Now, beyond just your sons, there's got to be a lot of people that are working for the VanDrunen farms. How many people are you employing?

VanDrunen: Probably a little over 300, and it varies a little bit. There's a little bit more in the summer than in the winter, but not that much. Most of the people work year round. We try to keep them busy all year round. We build equipment and so on in the winter and do repairs and so on, so we try to keep as much of the help as we can that work year-round. That's grown, so this part in sales and

management and so on, those people work year-round. Freeze-drying goes on year-round, so that's steady. We do in the summer work more hours. You know, the processing part of the herbs we run at night usually, so it runs almost twenty-four hours, so we run two or three shifts at night, or during the day, I'd say, all day long, so once we start harvesting we run twenty-four hours a day, and the freeze-dryers run twenty-four hours a day. So we do have people here at night to do this.

Maniscalco: Now, when you started in 1965, you weren't around 300 people. How many people did you have working then?

VanDrunen: Again, that was much more seasonal, maybe three or four or five year-round, but in the summer you might have twenty-five, thirty.

Maniscalco: So you've really grown quite a bit.

VanDrunen: Right.

Maniscalco: Very interesting, very good. So, you know, you've mentioned the rain a couple times, and it's got to be a really hard part of farming is to put all that work into the fields and money and everything else and watch it just kind of get washed away; what's the thing that's making you get up every morning and, you know, come into work?

VanDrunen: Well, that's one of the things that's interesting to farming. It's not the same every day; it varies quite a bit. You can get very dry weather, it can be windy, you know, crop can just be up and you can get a bad windstorm and blow off and things like that, so there's always more difficult than a manufacturing where you have a plant, so in a way freeze-drying is much easier to manage than farming is because you don't have the variables that you do in farming, so you can control things in manufacturing better than you can in farming. Insects, diseases, rain, cold, too hot, too wet, so farming is a lot of variables and it's harder to control, but it also makes it very interesting, so...

Maniscalco: Well, and I got to ask, with all those variables why stay in the farming side of it?

VanDrunen: Ah, that's a good question! (laughter) In some ways, the management of farming is a little more difficult than the other. If you can't manage it, you get out of it, but also if you can manage it there's also opportunities, because it is... The more difficult things are a lot of times the more opportunities there are. It's much easier to grow corn and soybeans than it is to grow herbs, and same thing, the profitability of difficult things is usually better than if everybody can do it, so that's part of the challenge. Why do it? Because it's probably more profitable.

Maniscalco: What would you...? I mean, to somebody that's starting out in the growing herb, in growing, they're starting an herb farm; what would you recommend to them? What are some of the first things you recommend?

VanDrunen: It's fairly hard to start because it's a limited market. It's a much limiteder market than if you're growing corn and soy beans or commodity crops. What to do if you were starting? The difficult part is really, the selling part is always more difficult than the growing part. Usually sales people are paid more than producing people in a way, so for a young person, if you're going into business you have to really look at the sales side of it, and if you can control and do a good job on selling you'd probably be successful, so... The selling part and the relationship part of selling is probably the most important in not only farming but a lot of businesses. It's easier to grow corn than it is to sell corn, in a sense. It's more difficult to run a grain elevator than it is to just grow corn, so... If you can control your sales and you can get involved in your sales, and the more you're involved in the selling part of your business, probably the... It's more important than the producing part of the business, many times, more profitable to you.

Maniscalco: And now VanDrunen Farms has gone through quite a drastic change from your father's time 'til now; what do you see for the future of VanDrunen Farms?

VanDrunen: It should be, looks good, I would say. It's changing all the time and you have to be willing to keep up with the changes. If you don't, you drop off real fast, 'cause there is—markets change all the time, so we have to adjust to that. There's things we have dropped and don't do anymore, unprofitable or there's more profitable things, and there's different ways of changing. The world is changing fast, particularly in our age, and if you don't keep up with the changes you can lose out very rapidly. So there's constant changes, so you have to keep improving, and where you can improve is many, many places, many ways. That's the success of the business is going to be on how well we can keep up with changes and improvements and keep improving products and service and quality and price, all three. And other people are improving, so you lose out if you don't keep up with them.

Maniscalco: That's true. What about for agriculture in general? What do you see for the future of agriculture?

VanDrunen: Very good right now, you know. (laughter) Ethenol has raised in a way[ the price of] all the agricultural crops; it's affected all of it. So prices are high on most all agricultural crops, commodities. Probably going to continue for a while, I would say. Corn they say is $8 a bushel now. It looks like it could stay there for a while, but in the long run that's probably—that's too high; it's going to come down, I would think. But when, that's a different question. It may be a while. So agriculture I think can keep up with what's needed to produce food, but cost of agriculture gone up and right now there's, with the

bio fuels for use, agriculture for fuel, that created a great demand, and it's affecting food prices, and it's going to for a while. Probably continue, so particularly for—had some weather problems in the Midwest where there's too much rain, so crops are affected somewhat. Yes, probably agriculture's going to be better than it has been for a while. I would think it's going to be more profitable, where it hadn't been very profitable for quite a while. There was an oversupply of food. That's changing and it may change for a while. It's going to take some adjustment.

Maniscalco: What about family farms? I mean, you're on a family farm and you're keeping a family farm alive, and it's changed a few different times. What do you see about the future of family farms?

VanDrunen: They're going to become, farms are becoming bigger and that's going to continue, I think, so the family farm is going to become less. It's efficient, you know. Family farms are efficient, so that's why they're going to stay around, but most grain farmers are 2-3,000 acres now, and if you don't have that you can't hardly compete, you know. You have to almost be that large because the machinery and equipment that you can use gotten bigger, so I consider it it's going to becoming bigger farms, and there's more efficiency in big farms, so it's going to be more difficult for small farms to compete. But I don't see that as bad; some people do, but I don't think that's... Everybody's benefiting from cheaper food because of more efficiencies of bigger farms.

Maniscalco: Well, great. I have one last question for you, and then we'll let you go since you don't want to be a TV star anymore, (laughter) and it's a question I get to ask everybody, and that's that this is going to be an oral history and it's going to be in the Illinois State Museum as part of the archives for ever and ever and ever and ever, and one day, you know, maybe one of your son's grandkids might walk in right before they're taking over VanDrunen Farms, and they might say, "Hey, there's Grandpa Ed, and he did an interview," and what would you like them to find in this interview?

VanDrunen: I don't know. I would hope they would have learned something from it. It gives some history what's happened, which I think is important to people to know how things developed and happened, how farms grow and how businesses grow, so there's some things hopefully they can learn. I hope they would come out of it knowing a little more about farming. It's a big part of our lives because all our food comes from farms, and it's changed a lot. You know, what's happened in my lifetime has been... We've gone from where most people were farmers in the country in seventy years to where, I don't know, it's only a few percentage of the people are farmers now. I think it's only 2-3% that are people that are in farming. There's a lot of people engaged in agriculture, making farm equipment and all that kind of things and selling and marketing, but actually people farming, I think it's only around 2% where it was, when I was born it was probably 80-90% were in farming, so it's changed in my lifetime that much. And we're producing more food, better

food, and everything else. So what are all the other people doing? All other kind of things. They're making cars and building houses and all the other benefits, TVs and all the other things that we are able to do and we have in our lifetime are because we've freed up people from just having to provide food, where there's a small number of people providing food now. It used to be everybody would almost be working on making food, so a lot of the progress in our world, in our country, and today in my lifetime has changed so much... More has changed in my lifetime than the history of the world. The last seventy years have been more change than the whole history of the world, and that's because we've mechanized and knowledge has increased, and we're more efficient, so where 2% of the people can provide the world with food, or in this country anyway, so it's a big change. If they can get an idea of the changes that have happened, and I think the changes in the year to come are even going to be greater than that, so the world is changing very rapidly, and technology is changing very rapidly. I've gone from the horse and buggy age where they farmed with horses to great big tractors, and it's a whole different way of farming.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Thank you very much.

Bob Warren: I've got one follow-up question. We've interviewed quite a variety of people, elk ranchers and pumpkin growers and beekeepers; there's a distinct odor in this building when we walked in. We haven't smelled that before in other interviews. Can you kind of describe what we're smelling in the building?

VanDrunen: Yes. We'll take you around, show you around what we have, but have all kinds of fruits and vegetable products here, just about everything that's grown we dry or sell frozen or dry, so you're probably smelling most of the herbs though.

Bob Warren: It smells like a spice rack! (laughter)

VanDrunen: Right! (laughter) So they give off more aroma than most other things, so yes, you'll see. We do some garlic and onions. We store them in another building because the aromas get too strong from, and other products pick up the flavor and onions and garlic, so we store those separately. But that's the spices and the herbs. That's why they're used is because they give off flavor and aroma.

Bob Warren: Super, thank you. That was a great interview. It's really interesting. Thank you.

VanDrunen: Yeah, thank you!

(end of audio file 1)