Interview with Neil Dahlstrom

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Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is October 1, 2008. We're sitting in the John Deere Collectors Center in Moline, Illinois, with Neil Dahlstrom. How are you doing, Neil?

Dahlstrom: Good, how are you?

Maniscalco: I'm doing very good. Thank you for coming and letting us sit down with you and do this interview. It's really great to sit here with you. We're going to start with all the easy questions, as I said, so maybe we could start out with your age, date of birth.

Dahlstrom: I'm thirty-two years old, born August 23, 1976.

Maniscalco: Okay, and where were you born?

Dahlstrom: I was born in East Moline, Illinois.

Maniscalco: You didn't grow up on a farm; you grew up in the city?

Dahlstrom: I grew up in the city, yeah. Yeah, that's why I don't have much of a farmer or an ag background.

Maniscalco: (laughter) That's fine; that's fine. Where you grew up, did you have your family around? Was there more than just your parents, or…?

Dahlstrom: There were my parents, an older brother, Jeremy, and a younger sister, Abbi.

Maniscalco: Okay. And what about grandparents? Did you have your grandparents around?

Dahlstrom: Yeah, both my sets of grandparents are still with us fortunately, so—Rose and Jack Dahlstrom and Viola and Bob Dennis.

Maniscalco: Okay. Are they from Illinois, or did they move to Illinois?

Dahlstrom: They are all from Illinois.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow. Wow.

Dahlstrom: So I'm Illinois generations back.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow. So how did your family get here?

Dahlstrom: Well, the Dahlstrom side is Swedish, and we're actually not quite sure exactly when that part of the family arrived. There were Dahlstroms in the Moline area in the 1850s and '60s. A relative married into a family that was involved with John Deere, actually, in the 1860s, which I found during my research. (laughter) My mother's maiden name is Dennis, and her mother's maiden name was Vroman; they're German. But family genealogy hasn't been passed down to me, yet. It's coming very soon.

Maniscalco: Oh. (laughter)

Dahlstrom: I'm a few years away from receiving that.

Maniscalco: You're not qualified yet for it, or…?

Dahlstrom: Right.

Maniscalco: Well, good. Can you kind of tell us what kind of a childhood you had, growing up in Moline.

Dahlstrom: I say what probably everyone says, that I had a fairly typical childhood. It's interesting I ended up working for John Deere, because my father built combines for Case IH [International Harvester] for thirty years in East Moline. So I grew up going to school wearing my red and black Case IH stocking cap as opposed to the John Deere green and yellow. (laughter) And my grandfather worked for Case IH as well—

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh. (laughter)

Dahlstrom: —in the same factory. Yes, so I guess we were Case IH people growing up for the most part. But public schools in East Moline. First job was the paper route for the *Moline Dispatch*. Played a lot of sports as a kid. Tennis was really big in my family, so I started playing tennis in high school, as did my brother.

Maniscalco: Very cool. How was it growing up in Moline with—you know, there's the big John Deere aura in Moline—and IH aura in Moline?

Dahlstrom: Well, it was interesting, because I really didn't know anything about John Deere. I was somewhat oblivious, to tell you the truth.

Maniscalco: Really?

Dahlstrom: And looking back, I think part of it was because at that period of time, growing up in the eighties when ag was down so much, there just wasn't really a lot of talk about it. Maybe I was just somewhat oblivious because I was a kid, and I was off playing and didn't care a whole lot. But I know that when we came down to Moline, we'd go to Temples Sporting Goods which was on Seventh Avenue, a couple blocks from here. But I never went any further north than that, which is where all the John Deere factories were, downtown. I have no recollection in my childhood of ever seeing any one of those buildings, which was there until the late nineties. While I was off at college was when they were all torn down. So that was the big John Deere presence, and I never really saw it, because by then, they were just kind of older, empty factory buildings.

Maniscalco: That's funny.

Dahlstrom: That's kind of the run-down part, abandoned part, of town, and I just really didn't know much about it. So I knew about the red combines that were rolling off the line at Case.

Maniscalco: (laughter) So does your family give you a hard time now, for working for John Deere?

Dahlstrom: Actually, they were pretty happy.

Maniscalco: Really?

Dahlstrom: I joined Deere & Company in 2001, and a few years later—I think it was in 2003—Case IH closed the factory down here, so my dad retired from there. So they were happy that I joined Deere, which was doing very well and still in business and still had a bright future in the area where my dad was retiring, and then those operations were moving.

Maniscalco: Now, you did go off to college. You got a couple degrees. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Dahlstrom: Well, I went to Monmouth College in Monmouth, Illinois, which is about an hour south of here or so. I always knew I'd go to a small school. My brother went to McMurray College in Jacksonville, and I always assumed I would go there, but I seemed to follow in his footsteps quite a bit. I decided not to go there—fell in love with the campus at Monmouth, and so I went there in 1994 after I graduated from United Township High School. Studied history and classics. I knew I wanted to do something in history, but I didn't quite know what that meant. I had done some volunteer work at the Rock Island Arsenal Museum on Arsenal Island when I was in high school, and also at the Putnam Museum. So I knew I liked old stuff. I like rummaging around other people's stuff. For some reason, if someone had been dead for a hundred years and I could go through their stuff, it was more interesting than someone who was alive and I could go through their stuff. (laughter) I guess that's just in me

somehow. So I know I wanted to do something in history—had an interest in museums and archives—so I started to study history at Monmouth. I got into ancient history with the help of one of my professors, Dr. Seinkwicz. So I picked up a second major in classics. I graduated with degrees in history in classics, with an art minor. It was there that I actually got exposed to archives for the first time. They had the college archives, and I believe I was the first student worker that was given the opportunity to work there. They created a job for me, to help me with my interest.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow.

Dahlstrom: I'm glad they did that. Worked out well for me.

Maniscalco: Yeah, that's really cool.

Dahlstrom: So that kind of became my passion.

Maniscalco: Now, you moved on to go do a master's degree?

Dahlstrom: I went through the master's program in historical administration at Eastern Illinois University. It was a great program, because you're exposed to archives, you're exposed to museums, historical societies; it's kind of a cross-disciplinary approach to history. So I went through that program in 1999 and received my degree in 2000.

Maniscalco: Now, after you got your degree, how did you begin working at John Deere?

Dahlstrom: In a very, very roundabout way. I knew for sure that nothing historically important ever happened in Illinois. (laughter) So I moved to Virginia. I've always been a Civil War buff. Like a lot of people in Illinois, I was a Lincoln buff—you know, grew up going to the sites in Springfield. But I actually took a job for a start-up archive called the Space Business Archives, which was trying to document the history of the commercial space industry, which ironically was only twenty years old at the time. Coming out of grad school as an archivist, there's not necessarily a lot of opportunity. I got that opportunity, so I moved to Alexandria, Virginia, and spent two years working there. Most of our funding came from NASA, from a couple of private space firms; that fell through in a couple years. So I was looking for other work.

I had actually taken a job in Bethesda, Maryland, when someone who I knew at Deere sent me the job posting for the archives at Deere. And initially, I said, "No, I'm not interested; I don't want to move back to Illinois." I really felt like I was earning it out in the DC area. You know, I was living in someone's basement and not making ends meet, and living life as a starving historian. But I felt like I was earning something. If I moved back to Illinois, then I would be cheating— (laughter)—like I didn't pay my dues or something. So I said, no, I wasn't interested, and didn't look at it for probably three weeks. Then I got to thinking: Well, my first job just disappeared, Fairfax County has

one of the highest costs of living in the country, a I'm an archivist, and those things don't really add up. It'd probably be great to live in a house someday, maybe have grass, a yard— (laughter) —things that I was pretty sure I could never accomplish. My family's here; I had a young niece and nephew. And so it just seemed like maybe a good opportunity. So that's how I came to look at the job a little more closely, and eventually got hired on at Deere.

Maniscalco: Well, great. So what was it like getting hired on, and those first couple days, and getting in there?

Dahlstrom: It was very difficult to kind of get acclimated. I grew up in downtown East Moline; my office was in downtown East Moline. My first day sitting at my desk was about, I don't know, 300 feet from the soccer fields I played on when I was a kid. (laughter) So I thought: Boy, for someone who said he was never returning home, I returned home in a very, very big way. (laughter) But I was so attracted to John Deere's historical collections, and they had such an impressive operation that… It was a great opportunity for me, career-wise. It was good to be home, readapting to some of the cultural differences between being in the Midwest and being out East.

It's amazing. I'd been gone two years, so it's not like I'd been gone for fifty years and didn't know what I was getting into. I remember my first day at work: I got in the car because I wanted to stop and get a cup of coffee, which I did every morning out in Virginia and there were six coffee shops on every block. I remember getting on Avenue of the Cities and driving, and driving, and driving, and finally stopped at Donut Delight, sat down—it was me in a suit and two farmers in overalls, who were eating donuts—and I thought: Oh, boy, what have I done? (laughter) So there was a bit of a culture shock for me, which is amazing how that happens. And it took me a little while to get used to being back, really—just kind of the pace of the lifestyle. Probably took me a good six months before I felt comfortable again. I'm very glad that I made the move, because good things have happened ever since.

Maniscalco: Now, you said one of the exciting things about coming here was the archives at John Deere. Can you explain? If we were to walk in, kind of give us a little overview of what's there and everything.

Dahlstrom: Well, it's amazing, because it's in the back of another building. It's in the back of a building which was a branch and kind of a distribution warehouse. There was no signage in the front saying that the archives is there, so unless you know it's there, you don't really know it's there. You wind through office spaces, and you go through an old factory space, and you end up in the archives. What you see are shelves and boxes, for the most part, like you do in most archives. A lot of people would make the comment to me that they expected to see all this memorabilia and all these things just sitting out, which isn't the case, because everything is organized and stored properly. But just the sheer size of their collection impressed me, and that the database systems

and everything involved seemed to be pretty state-of-the-art. So I was impressed that a company would put so much into their historical operations. Just being in archives, that's not always the case. Something like air conditioning, and temperature and humidity controls, and controlling light levels and those things. They seem to have a pretty good grasp on it.

What excited me most was the collections, because it seems like here's a somewhat untapped resource of historical information. It's all mine. I get to play with it. (laughter) So for me it was always about getting to play in cool stuff and getting to read things that hadn't been read in 100 years, 150 years, to touch things that John Deere wore, a check that John Deere signed. So it was very exciting.

Maniscalco: It is cool. So it's not just the paper collection, but it's also a historical collection?

Dahlstrom: Yeah, there's an artifact collection; there's three-dimensional objects. It's different from a lot of different corporate archives collections, because it's not necessarily an advertising collection. It's not a collection of belt buckles and advertising posters; it's a business archive. The important business records of John Deere go there for permanent safekeeping. It's very much a business archive and it's used for business purposes, as opposed to maybe an archive like Coke that's more of a media archive, where their focus is really on photos, on advertising posters, and that's their contribution to the company. So corporate archives are very diverse collections.

Maniscalco: Now, when you started working there, I'm sure you were thinking, John Deere, okay, what are we going to do with this? I know you wrote a book. How did you get to that point?

Dahlstrom: The book found me. (laughter) I had spent the last two years, actually, working on another book, which would come out. It was called *Lincoln's Wrath*. But that was on newspaper censorship during the Civil War. I was writing it with my former boss at the Space Business Archives. That was kind of dead in the water for the time being. The John Deere book came about because I was in the collection, just… I spent a lot of time flipping through things. One of my professors at Monmouth gave me some of the best advice I'd ever been given about doing research. He said that the book you need is next to the book you're looking for. Meaning, you look something up in the catalogue and go to the shelf to find it, but scan that shelf, because what you're really looking for is probably somewhere else. That same principle applies to archives. So I had a tendency of, when I was going to the collection to pull something, I would go through the entire box, because you're trying to learn your collection.

Well, the book came about because I was going through the papers of Charles Deere, who was John Deere's only surviving son and the second CEO of

Deere & Company. I was going through the D's to look at letters that were written to Charles from his father, from his sisters, and someone who was—the folder was labeled "G.H. Deere." Didn't know who that was. There were two letters inside. Turns out G.H. Deere was George Deere, who was Charles's cousin. He was a pastor in Riverside, California. The letters were written in the winter of 1885, spring of 1886. There were two letters: they were both marked "strictly confidential," and they both ended along the lines of, "Please burn this letter like you have the others." When you're an archivist and you see this, you've kind of got to wipe the drool from your mouth. You know that you found skeletons in the closet; you're kind of looking around to see if anybody else is watching, because you've found something that no one's seen in years.

So I read the letters, and the focus of the letters were: *Your dad's out here for the winter.*—John Deere spent his winters in California—*He's running around with strangers. We don't know who these people are. We saw him; he went out with some woman, and your stepmom's not here*—she didn't make the trip—*so we don't know who this woman was. She introduced herself as being from Los Angeles, then we met her a second time, she said she was from Boston. Well, we've come to find out she was actually from Moline, and we think she's a gold-digger, and she's after your dad, and she's trying to steal all of his money.* So he was giving Charles the heads up saying: If we send you a telegram saying, "You need to come out to California," here's the back-story.

For whatever reason, Charles kept these letters—didn't burn them as he was instructed to. John Deere returned to Moline, died in May of 1886 of that year. Turns out that Mrs. Warren was just someone he probably knew from Moline;—her husband was out there as well—it was much ado about nothing. But for the first time, John and Charles Deere were people to me.

They weren't people. John Deere, I learned in school, invented the steel plow. I remember seeing this portrait of him, which I now know is the boardroom portrait. He was never a real person, as I think a lot of historical figures aren't real people. Now they were real to me. So I started investigating further. I really got interested in Charles Deere, because there's still remnants of Charles Deere here. His home is here. It's now the Deere-Wiman House in Moline. You can take tours. It's owned by a trust. So there was a physical reminder. Charles Deere was really overlooked, in my opinion. Nobody had really looked at him and his contributions to the company. He spent almost fifty years running the organization, and nobody had every heard of him.

I started researching Charles Deere. I knew that we knew everything we could ever know about John. And boy, was I wrong. (laughter) The timing seemed good. 2004 was John Deere's 200th birthday. So now I'm six months into my job at Deere, I'm deciding I'm writing the end-all, be-all biography of Charles Deere, and oh, by the way, let's write about John, too, and let's do all this in a

year and a half. Because I'm naïve. I can write a book in a year and a half, and break new ground, and do all of these things. And of course, it didn't happen that way. I thought that it would be fun to ask my brother to work on the project. He likes to write, great researcher, so we decided to collaborate and write this biography of John and Charles Deere. So that's the long version of how I came into writing about John Deere.

Maniscalco: Well, very interesting. I'm sure you're the guy to come talk to about John Deere, now, so can you tell us a little bit about John Deere, and then we'll work into Charles Deere?

Dahlstrom: Sure. I found John Deere to be a very fascinating guy. Like I said, I grew up knowing that John Deere invented the steel plow; that was all I ever knew about him. It turns out that John Deere was a much more complex man than I think he'd ever been given credit for. He'd always been painted,he always had this legendary status, that he had this one great idea, to build the steel plow, and oh, by the way, almost instantaneously he was rich and famous, everyone wanted a John Deere plow, they were clambering over themselves. You know, he was predestined for this success. He struck his first blow on his anvil to build that plow, and the heavens opened up. This was this visual image I had in my mind, that he was the chosen one to build this plow and change agriculture forever. Of course, it's silly and ridiculous.

The picture of John Deere that started to come about was a man who was more or less a failure the first thirty years of his life. He very much had a fairly typical upbringing out East. Lost his father at an early age—at the age of four—lost siblings as a young child, was apprenticed as a blacksmith for four years. By all contemporary accounts, he was a very talented blacksmith, but they were a dime a dozen in Vermont, so he had a terrible time making ends meet. He was a journeyman, for all practical purposes. Borrowed money on at least two occasions to try to go into business of his own; both shops burned down. He could never really get ahead.

Well, finally, in 1836, he had defaulted on a loan, and from what I can tell, he was visited by the sheriff of Leicester County in Vermont. The records are kind of incomplete, as good records often are, but from what I can tell Deere was probably arrested, or at least close to being arrested. He posted bail and made the decision to head west, to come to Illinois, which was essentially the edge of the frontier at that period in time. So you know the story of someone who's thirty-two years old, decided I've got to make a fresh start, tells his family he'll send for them if they decide that they can make a living here. So one of the questions I'm always asked is, John Deere ran out on the debt? Well, the reason we know about this is because it ended up in the Ogle County courts a couple years later, and John Deere made good on the debt. So it's a great story we like to tell, that he made good on those early debts.

He came to Grand Detour, Illinois, which is near Dixon, along the Rock River. Again, it wasn't a case of John Deere just picking a place and saying, I'm going to go there. Someone that he may have known, Leonard Andrus, had founded Grand Detour. His father-in-law was Amos Bosworth, who was one of John Deere's former employers. Probably one of the two of those suggested that John Deere come out, fill the need for a blacksmith in Grand Detour. Made the trip by canal boats and by lakes: that's about the only thing we have from John Deere in his own words during his lifetime. People always say that John Deere was a simple country blacksmith, and I say anyone who spent six weeks getting from Vermont to Illinois on canal boats, via the Great Lakes, then went over land from Chicago to Grand Detour in late November, and then built his house from scratch on the banks of the Rock River, there's nothing simple about it. I can hardly cut a two-by-four with a chop saw (laughter) without injuring myself, so (laughter) there's nothing simple about John Deere doing this. Which is what you did back—that was just the way it was.

He ended up in Grand Detour. He was a blacksmith. All the sources agree that he found a broken sawmill blade in the shop of Leonard Andrus—Leonard Andrus owned everything in Grand Detour—took it back to his shop, built that first steel plow. But it wasn't a case of overnight success. He put it in front of his shop for a few weeks. Someone bought it, said, "If this works, I'll come back and pay for it; I'll buy a couple more." He sold that one plow in 1837, sold two more plows in 1838. It's not exactly an agricultural manufacturer. 1839, he builds a whopping ten plows. So he's a blacksmith who happens to make plows, like every other blacksmith in the United States. He wasn't coming at this from nowhere; he would have repaired hundreds of plows in his lifetime, so he knew what he was doing. But that innovation of steel was really an important contribution.

He was one of many blacksmiths who were experimenting with steel in plows, but John Deere did two very important things. First of all, he used the steel in the right place, and second of all, he sold his plows. The competitors didn't sell the plows; that's why you've never heard of any of them and you've heard of John Deere. He was a heck of a salesman; that was something that came out loud and clear in the research. By the time he left Grand Detour in 1848, made the decision to move to Moline, that was a big deal. It wasn't, again, that he just randomly chose Moline.

Moline offered great incentives for John Deere, because they were trying to attract manufacturers. Moline was the gateway to the West. Within a couple of years, the first railroad bridge over the Mississippi River is going to go through neighboring Rock Island, across the Arsenal Island there. And John Deere knew that. He knew that his future rested on being part of this gateway to the West, so when farmers are heading West, they're buying John Deere plows and taking it with them. So he's tapping into eastern markets; he's tapping into western markets. He builds a state-of-the-art plow factory in

Moline. He put a lot on the line, took creative risks. After he moves to Moline, John Deere's not in the factory building plows; he's in the field, selling plows. He is the company salesman. Takes a few partners who come with him from Grand Detour: Robert Tate and John Gould. Robert Tate is the shop superintendent, and he's in charge of manufacturing. Robert is the accountant in charge of managing the books. John Deere is company salesman.

So later on when we talk about this reputation that the company has for quality product, that's earned from John Deere himself: making connections to individual farmers, standing by his products. So it's as you would suspect,he's building relationships. He didn't get lucky. You know, God wasn't looking down on him saying, You're the chosen one; we're going to make you successful. In 1860, Deere's one of 2,100 plow manufacturers in the United States. There's a good chance that he's going to fail, like many of the competitors are. But there's things that set him apart.

I read over and over again about how he just couldn't manage his finances. That was just something that he was not successful in, and turns out that that wasn't the case. Some of the reason that he was considered to be a financial failure was just the manner that the books were kept in Grand Detour. If someone in a red house around the corner bought a plow, it would be recorded as "Man in red house." (laughter) Which is easy, because there's only one red house within a fifty-mile radius, so it's not like you're not going to know who that is. So we put modern context around things, often. But John Deere was financially savvy. The United States suffered economic depressions every twenty years. In the nineteenth century, competitors were going out of business because they were extending long lines of credit. John Deere was very good at hiding his assets. He was deeding property to his wife, and then the factory to his son, the equipment in the factory to a cousin in Vermont. John Deere didn't own anything, so when creditors called and tried to collect, John Deere didn't own anything, so his company stayed financially solvent when competitors were disappearing.

In traditional terms, yeah, maybe he wasn't financially savvy, but he kept the business afloat, which is really the most anyone could ask for in the 1850s in Illinois, because a lot of people were going under. So John Deere was just a very complex, very complicated man who was very visionary in many respects. Of course, there's the other side of that. He was bull-headed, he was hard to get along with, he was terribly difficult to work for. There's many anecdotes about John Deere just losing his temper because somebody wasn't doing it his way. He knew how he wanted things done. There's incidents of him kind of being this absent-minded professor. His nephew, William Ball, once told a story that he was in the carriage with John Deere and he had to stop at home, so Deere pulled in front of his house. Ball gets out, goes into the house, comes back ten or fifteen minutes later—carriage is gone. Doesn't see Deere for the rest of the day. Calls on him the next morning and says, "What happened?" Deere said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Turns out

Deere had an idea; he drove to the shop and started working on it. Had no idea that he was waiting for his nephew to come back out of the house, and they had plans, they had somewhere else to go. (laughter) So he could be very single-minded when he started thinking about something.

What probably surprised me the most is John Deere… We think of him as this uneducated blacksmith. Of course he didn't have a formal schooling, a formal education in the classroom—he was a blacksmith's apprentice—but he was widely-read. He had subscriptions to *Scientific American*, to local newspapers. He had newspapers sent from out East. So he had a pretty substantial personal library in his house, which just really surprised me. It wasn't the image of him that I had in my mind, of this blacksmith coming home and sitting down and reading the newspaper. Which is again a bit naïve, but you start looking at these people, and he was very complicated.

Very actively involved in politics. Became the second mayor of Moline, was very instrumental in the local abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War. He remained president of his company until 1886, but for all practical purposes was not actively involved in management after about 1858, when he signed the company over to his son. I think the assumption is he was president until 1886; he ran the company 'til the day he died.I It just wasn't true.

The business world had kind of passed him by by the late 1850s. He had the child prodigy that was Charles Deere—the formally-educated Charles Deere—who came back and adopted modern business strategies, and really took the company to a new era. So Deere was a terribly complex man, and really a fascinating character, and there's really a lot more about him that we just don't know yet.

Maniscalco: Are you finding more out? I mean, are you still opening up boxes in the archives and—

Dahlstrom: I am. I've probably saturated a lot of what's in the archives, and now getting out to state archives, correspondence with folks in Vermont, which started to come up. The great thing about writing a book is people know that you're working on it. So we found—some evidence came out of the Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury, Vermont, which is where John Deere grew up—that John Deere may have spent some time working in a plow factory prior to his moving to Illinois. That's a huge piece of his story. So there's some of those pieces that are coming to light.

I'm really interested in John Deere's political activities. Of course, there's always been attempts to make this connection between John Deere and Abraham Lincoln, and the connections don't seem to be there at all, though there's a couple times when maybe they were in the same place at the same time. Abraham went to the Rivers and Harbors Convention in Chicago in 1847, and I know there's information out there that I haven't gotten to yet that

shows he was there. I don't know if John Deere was there or not, but it would make sense to me that he was there. So that could have been a possible connection. But John Deere was a Whig; Abraham Lincoln was a Whig. John Deere was actively involved in the formation of the Republican Party in the area, but Lincoln never really spent much time in this area at that period in time.

A book came out last year recounting the history of the *Effie Afton*, the steamboat that crashed into that first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River. Abraham Lincoln prosecuted the case, and it turned out John Deere was called to testify in that case as someone being an expert witness on river navigation in this area. So John Deere went to St. Louis, testified, essentially saying he had no clue why he was there because he knew nothing about river navigation. The transcripts in the local newspapers don't say if Abraham Lincoln was the one who was questioning him. But if there was any case where the two of them were in the same room, looking at one another, that probably would have been the instance in time when that would have happened.

It's like anything. You start pulling at the thread, and there's so many little small pieces that you can start pulling at. My research now is looking at John Deere's first ten years in Moline, which was a very exciting time: the period between 1848 and 1858, when he moves here, and when he signs the company over to his son. That's the time when Illinois becomes the plow-manufacturing center of the United States. They wrestle that title away from Pittsburgh. By the mid-1860s, Deere & Company, and what would become the Moline Plow Company, are two of the largest in the United States, and they're across the street from each other.

But the characters that migrated to Moline in the 1840s and 1850s, they're building the largest mills on the Mississippi River. When entrepreneurs in St. Louis want to build mills, they come to Moline to benchmark on the mills that are built in Moline—the mills built by David Sears, who's harnessed the power of the Mississippi River, who's now got foundries that were built in downtown Moline. They're building water wheels, they're fabricating equipment for John Deere's plow factory, for the furniture shops. It's really a bustling time for this area.

They start to have this competition with neighboring Rock Island. Moline settled by Easterners: a lot of Vermonters, New Yorkers. Neighboring Rock Island is settled by Southerners:a lot of Kentuckians. John Buford, Napoleon Buford—names from the Civil War that we know—and Napoleon Buford is going to be one of the ones who convinces John Deere to move to Moline, because he owns part ownership of the foundry. So you have all these very fascinating, interesting people starting to intertwine, and calling for relatives, and moving to Moline, because they think Moline is going to be the Lowell of the West; that's what they called it. They thought they were going to compete

with Lowell, Massachusetts, with Troy, New York, that they were going to be a manufacturing powerhouse—which they were,up until the early twentieth century.

It's a euphoric time in Moline in the 1840s and '50s. The railroad comes to town in 1854, so you have this amazing boom in the area. You know, this was a happening town, and John Deere's at the center of it. In the mid-1850s, John Deere's something like the fourth- or fifth-largest manufacturer in town, so he's not even the major player in this area. Folks from Chicago know Moline. I would encourage you to ask anyone in Chicago where Moline is;they're not going to know. (laughter) You know, in the early twentieth century everyone knew Moline, and especially in the 1840s and '50s, because that's where a lot of the boom was happening. This was the gateway to the West.

Maniscalco: I guess for John Deere, you could almost say that it was like the right mix. You know, it was the right person, the right time, the right place, the right conditions, and all those right things sort of all came together at that one moment.

Dahlstrom: It was. It was a perfect storm. I mean, that's essentially what it was. It's always fascinating, because these are people who just couldn't make it out East, for whatever reason. They weren't born to the right parents; they were like John Deere, where they tried to make a start. You know, his shop burns down, he tries again, it burns down. He just couldn't make a go of it. But they're creating their vision of a utopian society. They're making it on their own. These people are coming together, they're working together, they're recruiting people who are like them, who think like them. They're building a manufacturing network, but they're also building the churches, they're building the schools. They're building these model communities from scratch so that it fits into their ideology. So it's pretty interesting that all these things can come together.

John Deere's a smart businessman. He came to Moline because they offered him incentives. He decided he was probably going to move his factory to Peru, which was the termination point of the newly-built Illinois-Michigan Canal. His partner, Robert Tate, said, "You know what? Maybe we should look a little further; let's go to Camden, (which is now Milan), and let's look at Rock Island, let's look at Moline, and see what they have to offer us." Well, the folks in Moline offered free water-power rights, and potentially free land to build the shop on, so they offered incentives for John Deere. He wasn't just wandering around one day and thought Moline was pretty. (laughter)

Maniscalco: You know, one thing—a kind of an over-arching thing—I really realized in Illinois, and especially in Illinois agriculture, is that Illinois is really special when it comes to agriculture. You have people like John Deere here, who invented the plow and then become this large force, almost, in agriculture. And you have all these other different—hybrid seed corns—and different

things coming out of Illinois. Why is it that Illinois is special? You know, even throughout history, it's been that… Dahlstrom:Well, you could argue that just folks in Illinois have this special connection to the land. (laughter) I think it's tough to say. It's an interesting progression, because someone like John Deere who came from the East, someone like Cyrus McCormick who moved to Chicago a year before John Deere moved to Moline. And he's going to start reaping enormous profits—no pun intended, even though it's probably a terrible pun. (laughter) In fact, strike that from the record. But reaping these huge rewards because it's the bread basket. The land is suited for agriculture. So it's that perfect case where if you're going to make these technological advancements, you've got to be on the ground. Literally, you're going to have to be where you get the most production, and the soil is suited for it. I think just the people are suited to that sort of mentality, because the land can sustain it. It's always been with us. It was with us before John Deere moved here, and it's here long after John Deere died.

Maniscalco: Now to move forward a little bit, the person you like more than John Deere, even, from what I've gathered—

Dahlstrom: I like them equally.

Maniscalco: (laughter) OK.

Dahlstrom: They both contributed. The reason we wrote the dual biography is becausemy brother and I, after lots of discussion, don't think the company would have been successful without the two of them. I think without Charles the company may have died in the 1850s. Without John, of course, it wouldn't have bridged that gap between success in Grand Detour and surviving the 1850s. So it really took the two of them, collaboratively, over different periods of time, to ensure the success of the company in the long term.

Maniscalco: Tell us about Charles.

Dahlstrom: Charles is a fascinating character, really a different path than his father. Charles' earliest recollections are in Grand Detour. He said he used to play Indian with his sisters. His sisters were always worried that he was going to drown in the Rock River. He got in trouble quite a bit. Unfortunately, we don't know a lot about John from his own hand. We know very little from Charles. He was asked to write a memoir later in his life, He got through about four pages before he passed away, but we have some of Charles Deere looking back on his life. We know he grew up going to public schools in Moline. He got in trouble quite a bit. He was sent home for disciplinary reasons quite a bit. He says that when he couldn't find his mother's protecting wing, his father would make him work off his punishment in the factory, would make him run a drill press or make him grind some plows or something. So he knew the factory very well because he spent a lot of time there working off punishments. There's incidents of him getting into fights in

downtown Moline at a dance reception or after a show or something. I always picture him as kind of just marching through the streets of downtown Moline, saying, "My dad's John Deere; I'm a big deal" (laughter) sort of thing, which may or not be the case. So he went through the public schools in Moline. He ended up going to Iowa College, which was in Davenport; it's now Grinnell. That connection was made through the Home Missionary Society, which was a religious organization based out of Chicago that John Deere became a Life Director of, and Iowa College was founded by members of the Home Missionary Society. From there, he went to Knox Academy, which was an abolitionist school in Galesburg. That was important to John. From Knox Academy, he went to Bell's Commercial College, where he received the equivalent of an MBA. He took courses such as How to Identify Counterfeit Banknotes. So Bell's is in Chicago.

He returns to Moline. We initially thought—and I think we write in the book—that that was probably fall of 1853. Now, looking at the chronologies, it may be 1854 or so. But essentially, he's sixteen or seventeen years old when he receives basically an MBA. So he learns about new business methods, returns to Moline, joins the office force as an assistant bookkeeper. He's soon head bookkeeper. He soon goes out into the field, starts making sales or working as a salesman. In 1858 he gives his father $21,000 in notes payable, in essence, buying the company from his father. He's twenty-one years old, and he is now essentially managing director, president of this company, which over the last six or seven years had half a dozen name changes. As John Deere was hiding assets, they would change the name of the company, because he was bringing partners in and out. Charles has brothers-in-law now who are joining the company.

Charles Deere, now, as a twenty-one-year-old, is managing this company. He initially has some missteps. Of course, you take over the company, what's the first thing you do? You change the name. You want it to reflect where you're working from; you want it to reflect you. Changes the name. It becomes the Moline Plow Manufactory. Puts *C.H. Deere* on the name of some of the plows, instead of *John Deere*. People begin to wonder, Well, who the heck is this? We buy from John Deere; we have a personal relationship with John Deere. So Charles Deere learns early lessons about what we would call branding today: the importance of the John Deere name and the relationship his father had.

The country goes into an economic depression in 1857; there was a panic, as they called them. Takes a little while to work its way to this area. But Charles Deere does something creative. His competitors are extending long lines of credit. John Deere begins to operate under a cash-only system. He cuts prices by 25 percent, says, "We accept payment in cash only." The company survives the Civil War. They take on the name Deere & Company in 1864. Eventually they'll incorporate, a new business formation that didn't exist. They incorporate in 1868 as Deere & Company. His competition starts falling

by the wayside because of these long lines of credit. Charles Deere has an enormous cash reserve; he starts building infrastructure, and he starts building branch houses, which no one had done before. He creates this large distribution network. He starts to diversify. He eventually goes into the corn planter business, starts going into the wagon business, and really starts to build this company that we know more of today, going from a plow manufacturer, heading towards this full-line implement manufacturer. So he really ups the bar for the company, and you can tell. Just the financial maneuverings. The company really becomes something different.

Along the way, Charles Deere becomes the formally educated, wealthy, Victorian businessman who builds the mansion on the bluff overlooking the factory, as opposed to John, who's one of the guys, who lived thirty years three blocks away from the factory in downtown Moline, who came from where I came from, who made his way. So John and Charles become these very different people.You start to sense some of those tensions as labor unions start to come into play in the 1870s and '80s. So it's kind of an interesting look at these two businessmen, and how important context was, but also how they were raised, and their contributions to the company.

Charles Deere, in very many respects, I think, is somewhat of a tortured individual, because he seemed to long for this relationship his father had with employees. He knew he couldn't have it because he was this Gilded Age gentleman who had his own Pullman car and lives on this mansion on the bluff. He was the first citizen in Moline to have running water in his house, because he's also president of the Moline Water Power Company. He's on the board of banks and all these organizations. He starts spending less time in Moline because now he has trusted people around him, something his father never had. So he's a pretty interesting character.

John Deere was involved politically, but primarily on a local level. Charles Deere is going to be a presidential elector. He's going to be asked to run for Congress. He's going to be asked to run for president. He's socially connected. He's president of the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics.

He's someone who always looked out for his employees. He prided himself in social opportunity for employees, and in raising safety standards in factories, which of course by modern standards were filthy. But he pushed for improvements for employees. But it wasn't enough for his employees, so he was always kind of troubled by that, that they didn't think he was looking out for them because he wasn't working alongside, even though, as I said, he grew up in the factory. But now he's the guy in the suit in the front office; he's not working on the forge.

So kind of a troubled existence, but he was good at what he did. And in 1875, the company has sales of a million dollars for the first time, which is a big deal. And he brings engineers into the fold—guys like Gilpin Moore. His

sister marries a guy named Stephen Velie, who's going to be his right-hand man until Velie dies in 1895. And he's going to be the guy who's running local operations. So the business really booms during that period in time, and they really start to set themselves apart from the competition.

Maniscalco: You mentioned that Charles would eventually be asked to run for president and a bunch of other political positions. Can you tell me a little bit about some of that stuff?

Dahlstrom: He never officially ran for political office. He was asked quite a bit to run for political office, but he thought his business was more important, so he never did. He liked to be the guy who was behind the scenes, kind of driving some of the action. He kind of considered candidacy for Congress, I think in the late 1870s or early 1880s, but he never really carried through on that. Information on that is a little bit scattered; that's one of those topics that needs some more in-depth research. But he was asked quite a bit.

Maniscalco: That's interesting. Now, let's kind of move from John and Charles, the two big founders of the company. I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about the company history, just in general. You know, eventually it became an actual company with a board and the whole deal. Can you explain how that occurred, and…?

Dahlstrom: Sure. Well, it really started with Charles Deere. Of course, if you look over a long enough period in time, everything's evolutionary. Even though we think everything's revolutionary, it's not. On at least two occasions, Charles Deere tried to form what they called—they were forming trusts in the 1870s and '80s—he tried to form plow trusts. He called them "consolidations" because trusts were a dirty word. But he was trying to eliminate inferior products, trying to consolidate the plow business, because he thought it was a detriment to farmers that there were inferior products out there on the market, and he thought there was too much competition. So he started to do his due diligence on all these competitors.

Well, for various reasons, those failed, but it led the way into the early twentieth century. It led into what's known as the creation of the modern Deere & Company, a phrase coined by Wayne Broehl, who wrote a corporate history of John Deere; in 1984, it was published. But that was a series of activities from about—really from 1910 to 1912—but overall from about 1907 to 1918. That's the period that we can kind of look at a lot of pieces at Deere & Company today and find their origins. So operations in Waterloo; in Horicon, Wisconsin; in Ottumwa, Iowa, all came into the fold during that period of time. Those all grew out of Charles Deere's attempts at consolidation, because they'd done a lot of research.

Charles Deere had two daughters, Katharine and Anna. Anna married Will Wiman, who was the son of Erastus Wiman, the King of Staten Island, as he

was known. Industrialist, a railroad tycoon who was Canadian by birth. When Wild Bill went on his European tour, it was financed by Erastus Wiman. He was one of the early owners of the New York Metropolitans. Big baseball fans, the Wimans, as was Charles Deere. So they had that in common. But Anna and Will moved to Staten Island when they were married. Charles's other daughter, Katharine, married William Butterworth, son of a U.S. Congressman from Ohio and then commissioner of patents. He was a trained attorney. Butterworth and Wiman knew each other from college and married into the Deere family. Whereas Wiman headed out to Staten Island, Butterworth stayed close at home. Charles and Mary built them a wedding gift of a house across the street, convinced them to stay. But he becomes the third CEO of Deere & Company. He was company treasurer for a decade under Charles Deere, then became the third CEO of Deere & Company. So it's under Butterworth that we have the creation of the modern Deere & Company.

We have the evolution of Charles Deere's company, which is the largest steel plow manufacturer in the world—who's now diversified into selling wagons and corn planters, has this large distribution network—to a period in the early twentieth century where International Harvester is gobbling up everybody—this massive period of consolidation. And the two biggest players in the industry are Deere and International Harvester. Harvester, just because of the markup of the products and the nature of their products, have something like 50-plus percent market share for agricultural implements. Then you have a company like Deere that has 6 or 8 percent market share. Deere's looking to get into the harvester business, but they don't want to anger the sleeping giant that's International Harvester, from whom they've always had this kind of gentleman's agreement: You don't go into the plow business, we won't go into the harvesting business. But times are changing.

IH creates their trust in 1902. Charles Deere dies in 1907; William Butterworth takes over. He starts looking at expanding the Deere world to move them towards this full-line implement manufacturer. They buy up essentially about a dozen companies over about a ten- to eleven-year period, culminating in the acquisition of the Waterloo Gasoline Engine Company, and in 1918, making John Deere a tractor maker for the first time. Which shocks people when I tell them that the company had been in business for seventy years before those early tractors. (laughter) We've been experimenting with tractors since 1912—the all-wheel drive tractor—we built ninety-six of them, but it was too expensive; it was too advanced for the market. It was a four-cylinder tractor. And after that production in 1918, we bought Waterloo, which was one of the market leaders in tractor production, and that was our entry into the two-cylinder tractor business. So you really got this consolidation of the modern Deere & Company under William Butterworth. We get into war production, of course, during World War I. We're building ammunition carts for the French, building all sorts of products for the war effort.

Then we get wholeheartedly into the tractor business. We launch the Model D in 1923—the first official John Deere–branded tractor. I'm sure there will be lots of people who dispute that. You talk about what's the first John Deere tractor—it's a great discussion in Deere lore. But like I said, this term, "the modern Deere & Company," that's kind of where it is under William Butterworth. William Butterworth will be CEO until 1928. He leaves to become President of the United States Chamber of Commerce. But he does something before he leaves; he creates the position of Chairman of the Board so he can stay active. (laughter) He'll retain that title until he dies in 1936.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Dahlstrom: It's always interesting to look at these folks back then you died in office. You worked until the day you died. So he passed away in 1936, and was succeeded by his nephew, Charles Deere Wiman. So the Wimans who moved to Staten Island, they had a few children. Charles Deere Wiman was one of them, and he became the fourth president and CEO of Deere & Company.

Maniscalco: Wow. Now, I guess we're kind of running out of time on our hard drive, but in about—well, you've got ten minutes is all. (laughter) In about ten minutes, is there something that if we were to come here—well, we have—but if somebody else were to come to John Deere, and there was something that they needed to learn about the history of the company and the history of the people that really founded, something that's… What is that, that you think?

Dahlstrom: I think the lesson is you've, of course, got to look at the context of all of this, and you've got to look at it from the context that people operated in. You can't look at it from a modern-day context, because we know things that they didn't know, and we have access to things that they didn't have access to. So when you look back at these folks, you look at a company like John Deere—John Deere's always been known as a very, very visionary company by contemporaries at any given period in time—so you look at a success of a company like John Deere. It's not because it's a company that's stagnant. These are people who are very visionary, who are very forward-thinking, and it's that old adage that the only constant is change. And that's, I think, very, very important.

We get comfortable with things, and we look at someone who collects John Deere tractors today, and it's easy to say, "Well, they collect it because they're nostalgic, and it's simple to operate, it's easy to use," but that's not the case. These were technological marvels. These were state-of-the-art. John Deere's first plow was successful because it was state-of-the-art. It was brand-new technology. It's hard for us to look at a walking plow, in an era of GPS and self-steering combines, and say, "Wow, this walking plow was state of the art," but it was. So it's a company that's pushed the envelope from day one. And you've got to risk a lot; you've got to put a lot on the line.

I think it's fascinating to look at the company today, as it continues to grow globally, because it's exactly what John Deere the person going through. When he came to Illinois, he didn't know what was in Illinois. Illinois might as well have been Russia. It could have been China for all he knew, because it was people he didn't know anything about, it was an untamed wilderness, it was an emerging market. There's a lot of parallels that we can draw from today to back then that I think is important. There's a reason that John Deere is an American icon, there's a reason that we know the leaping deer logo, there's a reason that we know the names of people who've been involved in the company, and that we know green and yellow, because it's an American institution. But it's a global institution, and it continues to evolve and change, because that's how success occurs. And I think you find that no other place than to look at a company's history to see that you've got to be visionary, that you've got to look ahead to the future.

It's pretty fascinating stuff when you look at the people who are involved in that, and to look at decisions to say, You know what, if that decision had been different, we could have been a monumental failure. We could have been bought out by International Harvester. In 1907, when Cyrus McCormick, II, I believe, called William Butterworth into a couple meetings and they discussed mergers, things could have been very, very different. But people stood up for what they believed in. They stood up for a company that contributes to society as a whole, that looks ahead. And I think that's pretty powerful stuff.

I find it to be pretty inspiring to see all the different pieces, like John Deere coming to Moline in 1848, this perfect storm. You know, there's a lot of things that have to go together for something to work, and the fact that something's worked for 170-plus years, I think is a testament to a lot of people. So that's a long version of a message that I think needs to be conveyed, but that's what I would talk about when people want to learn about John Deere, want to learn about Moline, want to learn about Illinois history—that it's always evolutionary, and there's a lot of fun stories and a lot of fascinating people to look at.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Well, thank you very much, Neil, for sitting down with us.

Dahlstrom: Thank you.

Maniscalco: It was a lot of time. Appreciate it. Wish we had more time. (laughter) Thank you.

(end of interview)