

TOM IRRER

Wayne: This is Wednesday, September 29, 2021. I'm Wayne Summers with Julie Peters and we are interviewing Tom Irrer and his wife **Marilyn [Irrer]**. We usually like to start these things with when and where you were born and a little bit about your family's background.

Tom: Okay, I'm kind of unusual. I've lived at the same address for seventy-five years. I was born at St. Johns hospital, grew up as a kid here. Then my father remodeled the old farmhouse where my grandparents lived. He moved into that and the next year I got married and moved into this house that he had just vacated. I went to school at Purdue for a couple years. I was gone during that time. Other than that, why it's been my address.

The mint in history: The first mint, I just discovered recently, was grown by my grandfather, my father, and his brother in 1937 and I don't think they sold any oil that year because--I think it was in '39--I saw an entry and some accounting from the '37 crop of peppermint oil and it was sold over to Laingsburg.

About three years ago, I started going through some papers that my father and my uncle had during their time in business from 1937 until about 1960 and they kept up quite a few papers, like a whole pickup box full. They stored them in a little building over here, upstairs in the cold, and then the mice found them. I've been sorting through these the last couple--I think three years now, mostly when the snow is on the ground and finding all sorts of stuff from the different implements they bought, the number of cows they had, the milk checks, and the animals they sold in Detroit at the stockyards. My father was the one that seemed to be more interested in the mint side of things. He had purchased some muck land north of St. Johns--I think it was in 1947-'48, in that neighborhood--and grew some mint over there. It was distilled right there in Woodbury for a few years. Then in 1953 he built his own mint still there on the north side of Colony Road. He had mint there.

I guess in 1979 it was, we were thinking about growing mint on mineral soil like they do in the far west. My father and uncle had tried it in the early 60's. Their problem was weed control primarily. You'd get the crop planted. You could cultivate it. On the muck land you could do mechanical weed control by using weeders and rotary hoes and knock out the weeds when you could just barely see them. They're a little white thread with a little leaf on it about an eighth of an inch long. When we tried that on the mineral soil, it didn't work very good because, when the leaves were that super small size, the ground would quite often be too wet to work. If you did work it, you beat it and it got hard, where the muck land didn't do it. That's one of the reasons that mint was always grown on muck land because muck land offered three advantages for mint. Number one, they had a good supply of water because it's always low and mint seems to like a fair amount of water. Because the muck would decay, it provided nitrogen to the plants. The mint likes a lot of nitrogen and so the muck land soils would provide that. Also the mechanical weeding aspect of it really helped mint be more a more viable crop on muck land. Nowadays, all three of those have been replaced.

Most of the peppermint in the Midwest is irrigated and also we have fertilizers to provide the nitrogen and also herbicides for weed control so the prior advantages of muck land for mint

production are no more. Midwest mint production has gradually, over the years, shifted from muck land to mineral soils. At this point, probably three-quarters of the mint production in the Midwest is on mineral soils and in the far west it's almost a hundred percent on mineral soils. There's only one farm that I know of--it's on the west side of the Cascade Mountains up in Oregon--that has some muck land soils that they grow mint on. Otherwise, it's all in mineral soil.

Mineral soils in this area have about a one month longer frost-free date than muck land so that's quite a benefit because we pick up a couple of weeks ordinarily in the spring and in the fall. I know on muck land quite often, one year out of three or four, you'll have a frost the last week in August on muck land, not a serious one but just enough to kill things like beans and stuff like that that kills easy. On the upland soils, the mineral soils, that frost will normally come a little bit later. We've learned that we don't have to plow the mint on the mineral soils. On the muck land we had to plow the mint under. If you just left the rhizome standing, the whole plant would kind of raise up out of the ground from the freezing-thawing action and then it would dry out and desiccate and die. That's why mint's grown on mineral soils mostly.

Wayne: So your father started growing mint, correct, in your family. Was it because he owned a lot of muck land?

Tom: Actually, the first time they grew a little bit of mint was--Mint was a hot crop in Clinton County in the 1930's. Just before the COVID thing set in, I was making some visits down at the [Briggs] library of going through the *Clinton County Republican News* and dragging out all kinds of mint articles. I'm not sure if that's on microfiche or not but I was going through the paper copy. I just took a picture of an article when I would find it and then I always had the date of the newspaper so I can go back with a copy stand, where you move the camera over the paper, and take a good picture. I've got it on my phone and it's in my computer. I probably have thirty or fifty of those rascals. I've been doing some work to get some history. As I was going through the paper, I found mention of something I was interested in, like my aunt or my uncle or something, why I'd copy that with my lens too.

Mint was a prosperous crop. The **Ward Vail** house on South Oakland Street in St. Johns was all built with peppermint money. This house was built with mint money. It's been a good crop for us. We were one of the first ones to bring the mint off the muck land onto the mineral soil. We've been an innovator in that respect. Sometimes you are rewarded financially for doing innovation and sometimes you're not but it seemed to work out okay for us.

Wayne: How has the number of acres grown over the years that you had for growing mint?

Tom: Like all agriculture, individual farms are much larger than what they were at one time. This Clinton County area was laid out in eighty-acre areas and sometimes a hundred and sixty, or a hundred and twenty, but mostly eighty acres. Currently, crop farms are one thousand plus size with four to five thousand in cropland acres. There's a few of them in the county that are in about the five thousand neighborhood.

The equipment has been available to increase the size of crop farms in the same way. We used to plant mint with a two-row planter and now we use an eight-row planter, so we've adapted some of that larger equipment technology to go with mint also. Because mint is a specialty crop, we found ourselves building most of our own machinery because no one else had built it yet and that's all part of innovation. So we've built our own mint planters, our mint distillation equipment, the wagons that we use to distill the mint in. We built quite a bit of that. I guess that's what kind of kept us going. There's been some welding shops that have also built mint equipment but it seems like, once they get a design, they stick with it for twenty or thirty years instead of upgrading. Sometimes things become obsolete within ten years, much less twenty or thirty.

Wayne: Could you describe the process of mint farming from the time you plant them to your harvest till you harvest and maybe how long the plant lasts?

Tom: To make sure we're growing the correct type of mint, the Mint Industry Research Council, which is an organization composed of end users of mint oil, such as Wrigley's and Colgate, the oil dealers--these are the people that buy oil from us and blend it to specifications for different people and also mint growers--and formed this organization for the preservation of the mint industry. One of the primary things it does is to obtain pesticide labels, herbicide labels, or fungicide labels so we can keep our crop healthy. For crop health, we depend on this unit to work with the different colleges and universities in the mint growing areas to get an unbiased report on different pesticides.

This group also maintains what they call a mother block of plants and those are plants that the industry accepts as a good variety to grow. They're maintained in a greenhouse out in Montana currently. For us, we can order transplants either from that greenhouse or other plant propagators. The plant propagators take tags off those plants in the greenhouse and root them in sterile soil and that increases the plants that way. We purchase these transplants and set them with the transplanter and then, just like mint in the garden everybody says, it just really takes over everything. We plant these in rows and then we allow them to develop and make that big, tremendous root system for the rhizomes or stolons that mint grows. For further increases we dig those stolons and plant them with a machine that kind of looks like a manure spreader a little bit. It's got a flat apron in it and a chain end feeder on one end. Instead of the everything flying up in the air, there's a big hood over it and it directs the root pieces into the ground and buries them. We plant them a couple inches deep with our current planter in eight rows about twenty inches wide per row.

We normally plant late fall or early spring. The object is you want the mint plant to live. When it goes dormant in the fall, you move it either in late fall or early spring. Then when it wakes up next year, it's in a new place. If we try to do it other times of year, we don't get quite the success. So we'll start planting on probably October fifteenth. The trick is to plant late as you can without getting muddy and then in the spring as early as you can without getting muddy. We like to be done by May fifth at the very latest because by that time the plants have started to grow new shoots coming up out of the ground. When you take that mother stolon, rhizome, it's got a little shoot that's an inch long and when you run it through the machinery the shoot breaks off and it's got to make another new shoot after that but the second new shoot is never quite as

healthy and strong as the first one. We plant, like I said, the late fall or early spring. The first year, here they call it row mint. In the far west they call it baby mint. It'll be in rows. We used to cultivate at one time and now it's all done by herbicides. We'll harvest our spearmint from those fields about July twenty-fifth and peppermint, probably August first pretty much for all peppermint. During the second year, these rhizomes will spread out over the ground and then it comes back up. It's a perennial. We keep our spearmint fields about four years, our peppermint about three years. It just keeps coming back all the time.

We'll keep the crop healthy with fertilizer and different fungicides only as we need them. We also use herbicides to keep the weeds out because weeds with most crops just lower the amount of crop. With mint, it lowers the amount of crop but it also changes the flavor because nobody wants to chew on rag weeds. You can really make a mess out of mint oils if an excess of weeds goes in it, impurities.

Spearmint seems to have a longer life for us and peppermint is a little shorter. Peppermint has a weaker root system also. It's just not as healthy as the native spearmint. That's one of the reasons that we've kind of specialized in native spearmint. It's easy for us to grow without irrigation because it's got a little better root system as far as gathering water up out of the ground. Here in Michigan, I think our primary limiting factor to yields is our lack of sunlight. It's not water, normally. It's too many cloudy days in June and July because mint oil is an energy product. It's got a lot of energy in it. The mint plant needs the energy from the sun to manufacture this high energy product. When we go to the state of Oregon or Washington, where they'll have maybe two or three cloudy days in a month, and Michigan has more than that. We just don't quite get the yield that they can where they have a more cloud-free atmosphere.

Julie: Does the humidity affect the plants?

Tom: Not too much. A high humidity will cause a higher prevalence of certain diseases. A low humidity, dry conditions, normally foster insect development or a mite development. Spider mites like it hot and dry. It's mostly sunshine, I think, and then in the wintertime plants are weak. They can die. When we do take a second cutting we like to cut early enough so that we get some regrowth in the plant and the plant can put some energy back in the roots because what the plant is doing in the last couple, three weeks of the growing season, it is getting itself all set for winter. The plant realizes the days are getting shorter. It's like dandelions and all kinds of other things that have to live over the winter. They've learned how to get ready for winter, build up their carbohydrate reserves in plants.

Wayne: Do you get two cuttings of both spearmint and peppermint?

Tom: We get two cuttings on spearmint. First one, we take about the fourth to the fifteenth of July; the second one, probably August twenty-fifth to September five. Peppermint, we normally just get one cutting about the first of August. It takes that long for the peppermint to develop the type of oil that we like to have. If we cut earlier, we don't get the kinds of oil the market wants and if we cut too late, then the market doesn't like that kind either.

Wayne: Is the value of the oil from peppermint and spearmint similar or is one worth more than the other?

Tom: Peppermint, being more difficult to grow and a little bit lower yielding, is a higher value, normally maybe fifteen, twenty percent higher peppermint is than what spearmint is.

Wayne: Do you change the varieties or do these pretty much stay the same?

Tom: We've used the same variety of spearmint for as long as we've been growing mint. One of the problems with peppermint, it is susceptible to a disease called verticillium wilt. There's been some plant breeding work done with radiation where they have developed some wilt resistant varieties that are slightly resisting the verticillium wilt but the yield is little bit lower. So far, we have not used any of those wilt resistant varieties here on our mineral fields because we have enough fields that we haven't been growing mint that long on them to have much of a problem with the disease.

Wayne: As long as you rotate them around?

Tom: Yeah, other issue is, verticillium is a long-lasting disease. A good rotation, if you're in peppermint, three years might be, about five or ten is kind of a long rotation. We did plant a field of mint, harvested this year, that the last time mint was in there was in the 1940's. I'm guessing they probably had verticillium in it because that's what happened to most of the field around that time. They'd get some verticillium wilt and it would kill the mint, then rotate out of it, never go back, and that's the last time it had mint. We did not see any verticillium in that field although I know that people have come back after five or ten years and see if they still have verticillium. It will still be there. It might be about sixty years ago. Maybe I just didn't see it. We might have mint there the next year and we might notice a little bit of it. What it is, it's a fungus that gets into the water plumbing of the plant. It grows in there. Then the plant can't get water from the ground up to the top of the plant. Any plant that can't move water inside it like it wants to, shrivels up and doesn't exactly die but it's not healthy either. After a while, it will die.

Wayne: So what's the distillation process?

Tom: Harvest process: We cut our hay, normally, with a swather or windrower. I think they call them windrowers in the Midwest and swathers in the far west. Ours cuts a twenty-five-foot swath and lays out the mint in three windrows. It spits out three behind it. We'll cut that on Monday, for example, and then we'll let it lay all through Tuesday and then probably Wednesday go out and put the rows together and then pick it up with the forage chopper, blow it into the wagons. Then we bring the wagon full of mint hay into the distillery and there we take these wagons and hook a steam hose up to the bottom of the wagon. There's a pipe distribution system in the bottom of these wagons so the steam is distributed evenly under the mint hay inside the wagons. The steam rises up through the mint hay. Just the heat of the steam kicks the oil off the plant. It's not really oil vapor. It's more of an oil fog, I guess, that comes out of the top of the wagon. There's a hole in the front, two feet tall and five feet wide, that we blow the mint hay in. We have a cover in the distillery that clamps onto the front of

that. The steam vapors and oil vapors go into a condenser, which is a bunch of tubing with water around it, and it gets condensed back down to the liquid oil and liquid water. Then it goes into a separation tank and the water goes to the bottom. Mineral oil being about ninety percent, the lighter water floats to the top and we skim that off and its put in five-gallon drums and that's way it goes to the market.

Most of the oil here in the Midwest, goes to--Colgates is the big buyer and Wrigleys. I'm not sure which is number one or number two there but then there's also some smaller buyers for that product also. End users like Colgate and Wrigley don't actually come out and pick the oil. Mineral oil dealers will take oil from different parts of the country and blend different types of oil. Oils come from different parts of the country will have a different flavor just like wine grapes grown in a different climate will have a different flavor and there will be some very slight variances from year to year. The oil dealers take care of that part of it and mix and match your oil. Of course, they want to buy low and sell high like everybody else. That's the way the mint is.

Wayne: How does the quality of the mint oil that we produce here in Clinton County compare then to Washington and Oregon and other places?

Tom: One of the miracles of modern science is these people that mix and blend have gotten to be pretty good at their craft. They use gas chromatographs, which we happen to have one on the farm, and also something called a mass spectrometer. Every barrel of oil has a sample that goes through both the gas chromatograph and a mass spectrometer. It's immediately checked for any kind of pesticides. These machines put out a kind of a wiggly line on a graph and if there's zigs and zags where there ain't supposed to be, they start asking all kinds of questions. The first one is, "What happened?" and "We're not going to pay you for it." Then you negotiate from there. I think mint's the only crop that I know of that everything is subject to a pesticide test. Everything else, tomatoes, or corn, or soybeans, apples, they take samples and they look for it but here the whole crop goes in so we're pretty much assured that there won't be any mistakes on the pesticide end of things. At one time the Midwest oil was considered a premium and they would automatically pay more but now that they have better ways of mixing stuff, it just kind of depends on what they want.

Also in the far west, particularly the Yakima area, a lot of the peppermint is double cut. Out there they take two cuttings and then that drastically changes the types of oil. They've learned how to take the two different kinds and mix them together and like everybody else, they want to source it where they can get a lot of it for a low price and make a higher value product out of it. That's what the oil dealers try to do. Midwest mint industry is declining. We're probably twenty percent of the total U. S. right now, compared to the far west. There aren't that many mint farmers that are serious about it in the Midwest, really probably half a dozen is about it, large farms, a thousand or two thousand acres of mint. There's a few hundred-acre people around here and there. Like all agriculture, it's either have a big farm or else don't get involved with it.

Wayne: Unfortunately.

Tom: Fortunate or unfortunate, that's the way it's gonna to be. When you look at the dairy industry and people say you need 3,000 cows to be competitive, that's a pretty high bar. It takes a pretty good-sized investment to put that all together.

Wayne: You've got to have money to make money.

Tom: Some of the newer technologies are only effective if you do them on a larger scale. Particularly with dairies, quite a few of them have been increasing a little bit. Here they start with 200 cows and now they're a few thousand or fifteen hundred. They've added on and added on and by the time you build the fourth link onto something, it gets to be awkward to work with. Some of the dairies have gone out and just started out with a bare piece of ground and built a whole new dairy designed to handle three thousand cows with the least labor. By getting things laid out right to begin with, you can have a more efficient unit.

That same thing is true in mint farming. Mint used to be distilled in stationary vats. They'd bring the hay in, pitch it in. First they pitched it back out which must have been a hot job after you turn the steam off to jump in and pitch out some long hay. Then they learned to pick it up with a steam hoist and then, about the 1950's, they made the switch from the stationary tubs to portable tubs with a hoist on them and these round trucks or wagons that they could fill up. Now we use wagons and we bring it in and when you get down the load, you take it out and dump it. Our loads, the hay goes onto the spreader which puts it back in the field and it's all chopped.

Julie: I have a question about that. I was looking at your web page this morning and you were talking about after it's cooked, how you would take it back out and spread it across the field. There has to be a logical reason for that. Is it to protect what's underneath or--?

Tom: The reason for it is, because if we don't spread it, what else you going to do with it?

Julie: Does it disintegrate then over the winter?

Tom: Several options are available. Back in the older days, they used to dump them and burn them. Then that makes smoke and that did not conserve organic matter. The neighbors were not happy because it stunk a lot.

Julie: Didn't it smell good?

Tom: It smelled like something burning. A few people have made compost with them. You can do commercial compost and sell it that way. We've done some preliminary investigations on composting and decided that, well, if we sold the mint hay off our farm, we'd have to buy more fertilizer back to replace it. We'd also lose that organic matter because it would be going down the road off the farm. Yes, you could make some money by putting it in bags and all of that and then you'd have to retail it or wholesale, whatever, but still you'd have an income stream coming in. You'd also have some expenses that, besides making the product, you'd be losing something. We've decided just to keep that compost for ourselves to put it back on the fields again. That's what happens to most of it. Most people will dump the loads, come back at

a later date and pick them up and then put them on a spreader and spread them. We're the only farm in the country that just dumps right off the wagon, goes onto the spreader and we spread it hot. We spread it on the same day that it's distilled.

Wayne: The heat doesn't bother the plants?

Tom: Sometimes you think you know the answer. I had a guy here that had a lot of common sense and an eighth-grade education, out of Westphalia. I've been trying to put together a machine that you could back up, load them onto this machine and then spread it with our spreader. He said, "Why don't you try spreading them hot?" I said, "Oh, that'll kill the mint" and I said, "I don't think the mint would stand that." He said, "Have you ever tried it?" "No." He said, "Well, why don't we try it? You have this field you're going to kill it anyway. Why don't you spread it hot and see what happens?" So we did that, and by golly, the next year we started spreading it hot. You'd think with all that steam coming out that would be quite detrimental. It didn't hurt a thing! If a clump the size of a basketball, the mint underneath it one foot diameter, wouldn't grow but the mint right next to it would fill in quickly, plus it had the advantage of all that organic matter would hold the moisture in the ground. Just because a guy is a little short on formal education, don't be afraid to take his ideas. Give 'em a try.

Wayne: I believe rather recently you went into essential oils.

Tom: I guess my son named the farm Stony Creek Essential Oils because he thought he might grow more crops. There's probably a hundred different kinds of essential oil crops or more. Currently, we're doing-- Spearmint is our big one and peppermint and another one called wormwood. We started out with a contract with W. F. Young Company and we still supply them for their drug, Absorbine Jr. The rest of it that we grow goes to dealers. We think it goes into perfumes, primarily. Some is used in vermouth; a little bit used for absinthe but I question how much that even would be. I think it's less than two percent. So we've been growing wormwood. That's a third essential oil. He also grows just a little bit of goldenrod for essential oil. Parts of it are used as an antioxidant. So that's why my son named the business Stony Creek Essential Oils.

Part of it is, that once we built this mint still that we can do mint with and get the oil out, are there any other crops that we should be looking at distilling because we've already got the harvest equipment? Just like the goldenrod thing, it'll take a couple days to harvest. You wash the dishes, get cleaned out; then you run a couple, three days of goldenrod and then you wash the dishes again. Obviously, you got to clean up between the crops but still, we can knock out a few barrels that's worth something in just a couple days. If you haven't got the equipment, it makes quite an investment for someone else to put together so we've kind of got a little advantage there. Yes, maybe we should be looking at some other crops. If you're going to look at the crop, then you have to be efficient enough to be able to produce it at low cost, a good quality, all that kind of stuff.

Also, the climate has to work with us. There's certain essential oil crops--sandalwood, lemongrass oil--that you can't grow in this climate. So we need essential oil crops that you could grow here on the forty-third parallel and make it work. Mint is a crop that, for good

yields, it likes long days and short nights. The farther north you can grow mint and get those longer days in the summertime, the better your yields will be if it doesn't freeze off in the wintertime and stuff like that. You want to try and get as far north to get those long days. One other reason the Yakima Valley is better yielding than us, we're on the forty-third parallel. They're four or five degrees higher than that, plus they're at a lower altitude. So they get the warmer weather. Mint likes hot days and cool nights. Hot days because the factory works faster and then cool nights because, like all plants, they're cold-blooded. If you have a warm night the plant will respire and lose mint oil overnight in the warm nights. If you're starting them, you want it to breathe real slow and not lose too much at night and the next day go back to making more again. You can grow mint pretty much north of Indianapolis. That kinda seems to be the line roughly. You can grow it in Florida. They have great big hay fields but there isn't that much oil in it? Ya gotta have long days, mainly in the far west. They've taken some mint farther south into Nevada and I think one of them got down into Arizona a little bit and just couldn't pull a reliable yield with it.

Wayne: Do you wholesale all your oils or do you retail some of it?

Tom: We're all wholesale. I guess we'll leave it that way. We do supply Hanover's Mints here in town [St. Johns] with peppermint oil.

Julie: Thank you for that.

Tom: Then they give us a few cases of some free candy. We give the candy to people for Christmas presents, people we come across and do business with, people we sell stuff to, people we buy stuff from, neighbors, landlords, in-laws, and outlaws.

Julie: Puzzle sellers.

Tom: You get some oil, did ya?

Julie: We got some candy. Yeah, it was good.

Tom: It's top of the line chocolate mixed with the world's best mint oil. Our competition for mint is primarily India and China. They do grow another variety of mint called, "mint arvensis." It has higher methol in it. The way the cost structure is, there's more hand labor involved, many smaller farms, two and three-acre farms, and then it'll go through four or five different dealers who buy the oil. One guy will go out to individual farms, put together a smaller bunch. He'll sell that to another dealer. Finally, the fourth or fifth dealer will pack it up for export to the U.S. Each of those dealers is trying to outsmart the other one. There's been more of a problem with adulteration of oil. They mix it with other chemicals to all of a sudden have more oil.

Wayne: The quality isn't as good.

Tom: The quality isn't as good. It's not reliable. It's cheaper though. For some people that make products, cheaper is okay. Not all the world drives the fanciest cars made and not all the world has the best flavors, just depends on the price point and what people's taste buds allow.

Wayne: I know you said you've lived your whole life right here where we are right now. Can you tell us a little about your family and when they first originally came to Clinton County, where they came from?

Tom: I have the ship my grandfather came on. I forgot where the paper is. It think it was in 1836 or something they came over and bought some ground. For farming in the area, he bought his first piece of property here in 1890, which is the other end of the field here. He bought that in 1890. He actually owned some ground in a couple of different places. Seems like back in the 20's, farmers would buy a piece of property, own it for five years then sell it or keep trading it with someone else for state farmland or something. There seemed to be more of that going on. Anyway, he bought that in 1890.

The house was there at that time. The barn was all there at that time. Also there was another building there. We tore it down. I wish we wouldn't have. My father always called it the old house. The new house was there in 1890 so I'm guessing, because the way that building was constructed, it was the first building constructed when--I'm not even sure who built the first home. **Chapman** owned it before my great-grandfather, **Sebastian [Irrer]** did. I'm not sure if he was the guy who did the building or not. I haven't gone back to look either. This building that we tore down had some living quarters in it. It was about sixteen by twenty maybe and then also it had the quarters for the animals. It was about an equal sized space and L-shaped around to the west and the north over where the living quarters were. My guess is that, after getting involved in the Michigan Barn Preservation Network and looking at old buildings and thinking more about history type stuff, when people came to this country, the first thing they had to do to get through the winter is have something to live in. You walk out to get a homestead or something, you got to have a house.

I think this was the first house that they built and then, because they came from Germany, they kept the animals also in the same building. They only had to build one building and so they put the animals on the west side and the north side maybe for winds and stuff. Because on the inside of that house part, there were boards and there was wallpaper on the inside of the boards. It was a timber frame construction with sill beam and hand hewed posts. Then the girths were just smoothed off on one side and the other three sides they didn't bother with it. It had vertical boards on the outside and then they put a layer of clapboard siding over that on the outside because they must have had some pride or something in the house, and maybe one more to seal it. There was another layer of wood then on the inside and then there was this wallpaper which, by the time I saw it, there was probably ten percent left. That building was there and my grandfather bought it. It was there prior to 1890, Victorian-style house. When that went up, I'm not exactly sure. This barn was there. That's probably been here since then.

My grandfather owned it, and then my father and uncle farmed together from '37 to 1960 or so, roughly. When they split the partnership, they had different parcels of ground. Each got some

of the different parcels of ground. My father wound up with one grandfather's house. My uncle wound up with the maternal grandfather's house.

Wayne: Did they flip a coin or something?

Tom: I don't know. It's kind of like sometimes when partnerships split up, it's not all happy and joy.

Wayne: That's what I was wondering.

Tom: They did get it settled and so that was worth something.

Wayne: When your family came here in the 1830s, did they originally settle closer to Westphalia?

Tom: I don't see any sign of that. I guess the best place probably would be you look at the plat maps. I think I've got one here, 1912 or '16, that shows Sebastian owning this piece and then **August [Irrer]** his son, owns some different pieces of ground. August's brother, Bob [**Robert C. Irrer**] had some pieces of ground around also. That's in Bengal Township. I don't think the Irrers have owned any in Riley. We live on the north side of Centerline Road. Across the road is Riley Township. I haven't looked real close at the Riley Twp. map. We have a Bengal one out in the hallway here.

Wayne: I know there's some Irrers on Stony Creek Road. Is that in Riley--?

Tom: There's a **Pete Irrer** in the neighborhood of Portland and I'm not exactly sure but he was part of Sebastian's relatives. Then there's another batch of the family, **Xavier [Irrer]** that moved up into the thumb and there's some Irrers up there. Some of them have spelled it "Error," instead of "Irrer." Sebastian's tombstone down here in the cemetery in St. Johns [Mt. Rest], it's just "Irer," one "r." Some family went back to Germany, according to one story, and they say that they went back to two "r's." With a modern genealogy stuff people look back the last ten years to what they did before and it was hard to find evidence of this name, Irrer, in Germany. I know couple, three of my relatives have looked at it--**Bill Irrer**, I think he's works in the Paine-Gillam Scott Museum there. He's done some looking in ancestry stuff and he thinks another letter got left off when we came across the pond. They came through Ellis Island. My guess is, if you look at the word, "Irrer" in German, it's *crazy person* or *mad man*. My guess is that when they were running Ellis Island, you got immigrants coming in. So you're going to have some German people here that know how to speak German and some English. They're going to be running the counters where the German people come in. The Polish people, they're going to be running counters where the Poles come in. You wouldn't put an Italian in to talk to a shipload of Germans. I mean, it wouldn't happen. I'm guessing that someone came across and I think the counter guy got upset at him for having the wrong name or whatever the reason was, he said "Oh, we'll just write Irrer, crazy person!" It's a stupid explanation but I can't find a better one. I guess we go with that but that's as far as I know.

Julie: I can check at the Archives though on Tuesday, the old plat maps, see what I can find.

Tom: I've got one plat map out here on the wall. I got a whole raft of the last 20 years and then I've got the *History of Clinton County*, 1880. I've got that book and then I realized it's online. I've got that. I was reading about Stony Creek that was named by the French. The French had gone all the way up over the top of Michigan, floated up the Grand River, floated up the Maple River, floated up the Stony Creek on the water. They named it the "Rue de Roche," the river of rocks. That got transferred into Stony Creek. In Clinton County, it has an "e" in it and Ionia County, there is no "e" in it. I don't know the story behind that.

Wayne: We're undoubtedly the correct one.

Tom: Once they named the farm, I got to looking up the word, "stony." The official dictionaries recognized the no "e" one more than one "e" one. We get to traveling around the state and seemed to be a lot of Stony Creeks. Counting Mud Lakes, how many Mud Lakes are there? How many Stony Creeks? Probably 20 or 50. I don't know.

Julie: So the old house was out here in the front of this house?

Tom: No, it's not. On the map it was over at the other place.

Wayne: Did you save any of those old beams?

Tom: Actually, there is only one beam I saved. It was a splice. Since I kind of got involved in the Michigan Barn Preservation Network, they asked me to be on the Board. I said I would. Now they nominated me for president. Three people voting; one person nominates; one person votes; and the guy who doesn't say anything, he gets it. I've seen some beams at some older buildings that way. The picture on the wall there, and it's the building set up at the top of the picture there. This set of buildings here, down towards the bottom of the picture, it's a eighty acre field there a half mile wide and quarter mile up and down.

Wayne: What's the story behind the "Will you marry me?"

Tom: It was done by **Doug[las Irrer]**, obviously. There was some wheat stubble and he took a six-foot lawn mower out and cut all those letters into the stubbles one afternoon back when GPS first came around. Give you an idea of the size, the dot on the question mark, is twelve feet in diameter.

Julie: She said, "Yes?"

Tom: Yeah. So then Mike -?- came over to check it out and so we went and looked at it and it looked okay after that day. The next day Doug invited **Amber [Irrer]**, said he wanted to show her what the farm looked like from the air. So Mike came back. He had the route all planned out to get the right altitude and where we all had to sit in the plane. I was in the front seat and those two were in the back and Amber had to lean way over. She was on the high side of the plane as we did the circle, as we dropped the wing, so she had to lean away over Doug. When she did that, then I could take a picture of them when they first saw it. She was quite

surprised. We had a few planes circle after that, just some private plane that happened to be going over, kind of like, “Well, what's that down there?” taking another loop. Then we got **John Wagner** to do some pictures. He's done a lot of light house pictures. He's got a real expensive camera with the gyroscope on it. He went up and did those things twenty years ago.

Wayne: One of those few proposals that very few people would see even though they would have driven right by it.

Tom: Drive by on the road. We've had four kids. They have all been married once, eight grandkids. Life is good. Marilyn likes her house.

Wayne: At least one of your sons is now working with you?

Tom: Doug manages the farm and all his people, buys the fertilizer. He decided to plant wheat in this field. He's wondering when he's going to sell his mint oil.

Wayne: So you let him do all the worrying now?

Tom: Yeah, he does that part. I razz him a little bit about I don't have to worry any more. I need to keep my payments for rent so he can do all that and then I realize, I can't say that too much but we kind of get along pretty good with each other. That's kind of where we're at.

Wayne: In the busy season, how long is your day?

Tom: My day, when I get done sleeping, I get up and when I get tired, I go to bed.

Julie: Let's say, your son's busy day then.

Tom: I was coming to that. We have tried running the distillery twenty-four hours a day. It seems like people that run that two to four, to five neighborhood get the days and nights all mixed up. We've gone to running two shifts. The first one starts at five in the morning and then they switch about three in the afternoon and then they run till about midnight on the second shift. The first shift is, primarily, the older guys because they like to get up early in the morning and they go to bed early and then the second shift is normally the younger guys because they seem to want to stay up later at night. That's actually working out pretty good for us. Besides the harvest crew, there will be a mechanic who just comes out during the normal times, seven or eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, and cover things that happened that aren't supposed to, as well as doing some maintenance once in a while.

Wayne: How many employees do you have?

Tom: Oh, probably about eight right now, I guess. During harvest, we'll have about a dozen.

Wayne: They're all part-time part of the year?

Tom: No, most of them are full-time. The guy planting wheat today, he sold his dairy cows. Back when milk was twenty-five dollars a hundred, he was smart enough to sell. He had a herd of a couple hundred in Ohio and he came up here. He'd drive tractor for us this summer off and on. He's planting wheat today. He helps with the mint still. He works on one shift, runs one. Most of the guys are full time. We've got a couple mechanics that can do the electric and hydraulic stuff, the computer stuff that's on tractors nowadays.

Wayne: Do you use GPS then to do all your plantings?

Tom: We have GPS on quite a few pieces of equipment. Our swather that cuts the mint, that's all GPS oriented. The units could switch from one tractor to another. Our chopper will have GPS on it. The tillage, I think he's got GPS. He's working in the field with it right now. There's a hooded sprayer goes through our wormwood. We don't cultivate. We spray on Roundup between the rows. We have this special sprayers that has hoods on it, just kind of spreads a twenty-inch-wide swath between the rows. And then we can also go crossways to thin the crop. We used to set transplants. At a thousand dollars an acre for transplanting, we've learned how to direct seeds. It knocks quite a bit off the expense side. We got about four or five GPS units, maybe more, I'm not sure. They switch back and forth. Once in a while I get something with GPS but not very often.

Wayne: I can see you've seen a lot of changes in farming over your lifetime as we go from what it used to be. Now GPS controls tractors and equipment.

Tom: I missed out on the horses.

Wayne: I'm not saying you're that old.

Tom: I was sitting with **Roy Davis**, the excavator guy. I was talking to him at a horse pull one night at the county fair. He's always had antique trucks, like the 1920's with chain drive and all that kind of stuff. He used to have drag lines and stuff. I said, "You ever have any horses at the farm?" He says, "My dad said that the future was not with horses but with machinery so I kind of went with the machinery." Then I asked, "Well, did you work with computers at all in later life?" "Nope, never did that either." I said, "Well, you lived between the horse age and the computer age."

Wayne: I think he saw both of them being used.

Tom: He kind of worked between. One time I got a whole bunch of payroll stuff down there. You worked for twenty-five cents an hour, dollar a day, dollar and a quarter a day. These papers that father and my uncle had, I wasn't quite sure how to handle, so I started sorting. Normally when you'd pick up a box it would have mostly one or two years in it. I developed a box for each year and I've got from '37 to 1959 or '60. When I get into the 1944, for example, I put all the 1944 stuff into one box, all the stuff I didn't throw away. This is the first cut. First of all, it's got to be legible; second it's got to be somewhat meaningful. If it's a piece of paper from **Oliver Montague** with a part number on, it is not worth too much. When you buy a tractor or it talks about that or something or freight coming in on the railroad. Even in the

1950's a lot of freight came by rail. He'd buy a pump out of Battle Creek and come here by rail. You just don't think about that.