

Today, Wayne and Michelle Sirles represent the fifth generation on the farm. Wayne worked with his parents Ren and Betty for many years before Michelle joined the farm. Together, they helped Wayne's parents through a transition to the next generation of farming operations, challenges, and opportunities. Photo credit: Nina Wilson

Rendleman Orchards' mark of progress, also link to farming past

The feeling you have and the sites you see when visiting love are very much the definition of an American family farm. Rendleman Orchards are things you rarely experience in this country nowadays.

There are few sesquicentennial farms in America still operating as a full-time family farm business.

Still today, Rendleman Orchards has most of the original farm buildings still intact and in use. This most certainly gives an authentic feeling to customers and guests to the farm. Characteristics stir up the feeling of an era gone by, yet a farm family willing and committed to preserve an American way of life. Walking on the farm, you are quickly aware the Rendleman family, the land, and the Orchard business they

It wasn't until the addition of the flower fields in 2018, established by the fifth generation, now referred to as The Fields at Rendleman Orchards, that visitors to the Farm Market could actually walk around on the property.

In earlier years, Rendleman Orchards was primarily a wholesale operation and closed to the public. However, in 2002, it was the 4th generation - Ren and Betty Sirles - that expanded into retail, building and creating the popular Farm Market. Betty developed many of the Farm Market Favorites that are still sold today, utilizing the peaches and apples grown

Continued on Page 3

The story behind our flowers For years Michelle Sirles asked her husband Wayne ing the fields up to the public and requests for personal

to plant a big field of sunflowers. It would be just for fun, for the family to enjoy, to cut, and have for home decor and arrangements. Like most farmers, planting flowers "for fun" was not at the top of the list of priorities during harvest season. Finally though, after much "persuading", in 2018, Wayne finally agreed, and that one move started a new business adventure that no one ever expected.

After posting a photo on Michelle's personal social media page, the private messages to the Rendleman Orchards page began to roll in - questions about openphotos in the flowers.

The excitement that the first flower field created was undeniable and created so much excitement in the air.

After many people warning Michelle and Wayne to not open to the public and presenting a host of issues and concerns related to opening the field and farm to the public, they decided to take a chance... and they have never looked back. The flower field was just too pretty not to share with others. It was bringing Michelle, Wayne, and the whole family so much joy personally, Continued on Page 3



Going into the sixth season of flower farming, Rendleman Orchards grows zinnias, cosmos, strawflowers, a mix of traditional and autumn-colored sunflowers, as well as a variety of mums. Photo credit: Nina Wilson



This publication is dedicated to the generations before us here at Rendleman Orchards:

John & Isabelle Rendleman FIRST GENERATION

Grover & Iva Rendleman SECOND GENERATION

James & Mary Rendleman Helen Rendleman Sirles THIRD GENERATION

Wayne "Ren" & Betty Sirles FOURTH GENERATION

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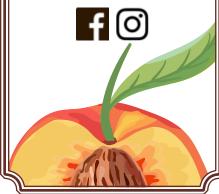
<u>Farm Market Hours</u>

Late June - October 31

Mon – Sat: 9am - 5pm Sun: 12pm - 5pm

Nov. I - Christmas Mon - Fri, By Appointment

rendlemanorchards.com



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The Farm Market opened in 2002. Over the years, in addition to Rendleman Orchards' own produce, the product offering has grown to include baking mixes, apple butters and applesauces all all made with their own apples and longtime family recipes. They also carry other local produce as well as a wide variety of jams, jellies, salsas, barbeque sauces and other unique specialty foods. Photo credit: Nina Wilson

From orchard to porch, produce sales today

You don't hear a lot of stories about businesses and organizations surviving 150 years in operation. They are out there, but it is rare. It's even more rare for those stories to be about family farms who grow food on the farm while also withstanding the test of time - the Great Depression, recessions, two pandemics, harsh weather, the ups and downs that come with family changes and dynamics, and ever-changing farming regulations, as well as changing consumer preferences. In fact, only 1% of family businesses in America make it to the fifth generation. So, this major milestone for Rendleman Orchards is certainly one to get excited about.

In the early days of the farm, the scenery - the crops and sources of farm income - was much different with fewer acres of fruit trees, and fields of other specialty crops including asparagus and rhubarb. A major source of income from the farm came from raising and trading mules. (Read more about how the mules saved the farm on pg. 8)

What's changed in the last 20 years?

In 2002, the Farm Market was built to accommodate growing customer demands for fresh produce from the farm, along with increased interest in "farm fresh" specialty products and a growing interest in experiences such as visiting a farm. In years prior, "seconds" (imperfect fruits) were sold out of the packing shed. This shift to more on-the-farm retail helped boost the farm to truly be a destination for customers and their families.

In the years to follow, changing food safety standards and regulations motivated Rendleman Orchards to focus on



2020 was an important year for the online store on rendlemanorchards. com - This is when peach gift boxes were introduced and available to ship farm to your porch nationwide. Many happy customers have enjoyed the flavors of the orchard from afar as the packaging is well-designed to hold the fragile fruits safely for shipping. Photo credit: Nina Wilson



The original packing shed still stands on the farm but is used today for other farm storage. It was the hub of activity with harvested produce delivered for sorting to be packed and shipped out. Here is a busy peach season in 1941; the three gentleman on the far right are Dr. Wayne P. Sirles (Ren's father), James "Jimmy" Rendleman (Ren's uncle), and Grover Rendleman (Ren's grandfather). Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

implementing the food safety standards of on-farm growing and packing. Today, the orchard is only one of a few "full service" operations growing, tending, harvesting, packing in their own facility, and delivering produce in their own trucks to sell it directly to consumers through wholesale markets and their own farm market.

While the entire farm was changing to formalize food safety documentation requirements, accommodating changing consumer demands, and experiencing the growth and popularity of the Farm Market, the Rendleman/Sirles family was changing, too. Ren and Betty Sirles began transitioning farm leadership to their son, Wayne. Wayne is the fifth generation to head up the farm operation. His wife Michelle joined the farm business in 2014. This offered tremendous help for Ren, Betty, and Wayne, and an added dose of creativity with Michelle's background in graphic design, marketing, human resources, and an off-the-farm career perspective, as she was raised in St. Louis.

As the fourth and fifth-generation team dynamic developed, everyone involved began to grow into different roles! Wayne began to tackle farm regulations, started exploring further sustainability practices, and took on managing wholesale sales and pursuing new wholesale markets and customers. Michelle seized the opportunity to help the orchard's marketing efforts by developing valuable connections with customers through social media and web marketing. This would later lead to testing the waters of online produce sales.

The pandemic was a transformative year for online retail for the farm with the first "peach gift boxes" sold and shipped.

Today, Rendleman Orchards is one of only a handful of farms in the United States shipping peaches direct to consumers' porches. (See how to order peach and apple boxes on page 12)

Today's technology has a tremendous impact on Rendleman Orchards! From implementing online marketing and sales to technology to manage and support wholesale customer transactions for ease of communication and efficiency, and updating storage and packing systems, these practices help this fifth-generation business to operate more effectively so that they can have a plan and positive outlook for future generations on the farm.

Where can you find us?

Today, the majority of produce grown on the farm is sold through wholesale outlets like grocery stores, farm markets, roadside stands, and food distributors serving schools, small grocers, and restaurants. To guarantee high-quality produce and safe delivery through the wholesale channels, Rendleman Orchards focuses on sales and distribution within 8 hours (or less) of the farm.

The remainder of produce grown on the farm is sold through on-the-farm retail at the "Farm Market". Selling produce off the farm and directly to consumers has always been part of the farm business, but has especially changed and increased in the past 20 years.

All changes on the farm through the years have been driven by a mix of meeting consumer and market demand, making sustainable choices for the natural resources of the farm, and heavy emphasis on keeping the farm running for future generations.



Rendleman Orchards' mark of progress Continued from page 1

on the farm and long-time family-approved recipes.

Amid the growth of agritourism, Rendleman Orchards has chosen a slightly different path of "agritainment" offerings. They highlight their history by allowing guests a u-pick flower and pumpkin experience while also walking among what are historical migrant homes and the original farm buildings.

Original buildings tell a story

Some buildings still remain in use now by year-round employees that help maintain the orchard in the off-season, while other original farm buildings are used for storage. Visitors often use these unique, old buildings as backdrops for memorable visitor photos.

The flower fields are nestled among these old structures, allowing visitors to view agricultural history up close and learn how crops were harvested and by whom over the course of their 150 years.

The original farmhouse now serves as the business headquarters. Some of the original rooms date back to at least the 1870s. Later, the home would be expanded to add a bay window, porch, plumbing, and electricity.

Unique harvest and operations

Most visitors do not realize that all of the specialty crops grown at Rendleman Orchards are still hand-picked. While they no longer utilize migrant workers, they do have year-

round local help in the off-season. Some seasonal and contract workers live on the property at the height of harvest.

Most of the harvest team lives at the Orchard in a private area with double occupancy rooms, community restrooms, a cookhouse, and laundry, much like dorm-style housing. The primary labor force for the growing and harvest season are workers who come from Mexico to live on the farm and support all aspects of fieldwork and harvest from April to October.

The farmland is made up of peach, apple, and nectarine orchards, woods, and additional private family homes. Currently, three generations of the Rendleman-Sirles family live on the farm. Scattered about that private acreage are many historical wood and tin barns and various historical buildings.



The original Rendleman home was built in the mid 1800s and now serves as a headquarters for the Orchard's operations. It is nestled among original farm buildings still in use along with modern packing facility, cold storage, and retail market. Pictured above are John and Isabelle Rendleman with family. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

The story behind our flowers Continued from page 1

they wanted everyone else to see and feel the same joy. Within days, they designed an entrance, pathways, and signage. The crowds came, hundreds of sunflower photos were posted on social media, and just like that the farm's retail business changed - in a good way. Actually, it changed in a great way! People were spending more time at the farm. Walking outside with those they love, picking flowers, snapping beautiful pictures, making their own memories, sipping cider slushies on our porch, and going home with fresh-picked apples and more delicious Rendleman Orchards products.

Something they didn't expect? Customers sharing their thanks, sending their photos in private messages, telling what it meant to them to have the experience at the farm and why they loved it. This went on for weeks. Their photos flooded in, though they weren't just in the flowers. They were in front of the old chippy farmhouses and buildings, rusty water hydrants, and other everyday old farm objects in need of some repair. It made Michelle realize people were interested in life on the farm and what that is like; and, people really want to have a connection to a family farm.

The smiles and enjoyment the sunflowers brought to the community, orchard team, and Sirles family, have led to a field of zinnias, then later cosmos!

Never in their wildest dreams did Michelle or Wayne imagine how beautiful the flower fields would be or the impact they would have on so many people.

Next time when visiting the farm, find a moment to slow down, experience the flowers and see the farm.



The excitement from the first flower field of sunflowers was undeniable and offered numerous opportunities for enjoyment to all who visited the farm. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary

Oves Rendleman Orchards offer U-Pick Fruit?

The short answer is NO, but we think you should know why.

Approximately 90% of Rendleman Orchard's land is not open to the public. Because it is a true commercial, working farm, still selling the majority of produce wholesale to grocery stores and food distributors. The general public is not allowed in those areas due to food security and personal safety around equipment. It is difficult and quite risky for a farm our size to offer a U-Pick fruit experience alongside wholesale operations.

We hope visitors value the other experiences carefully designed to showcase the farm from the flower fields and u-pick pumpkins, to fresh peach smoothies and apple cider slushies, apple butters, and other specialty products; all made from our family recipes, and produce from our farm.

If these walls could talk

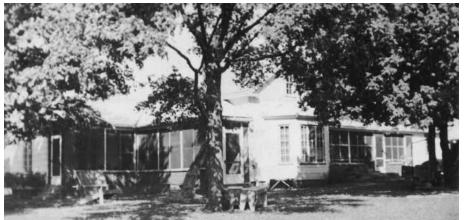
place. It's where farm families gather for happy times, hard times, do business, and watch kids grow. The old farmhouse at Rendleman Orchards is the heartbeat of the family farm with four generations living there over the years and six generations passing through and raised "by the farm".

Before the house, as we know it today, the original home was a small log cabin built in the mid 1800s.

An old farmhouse is, by any measure, a unique It was purchased by John and Isabelle Rendleman in 1873 from her parents. Many Rendleman family members were born and raised in the house over the years.

While the house has grown and changed with additions and modern conveniences to accommodate a growing family, it still has original woodwork, hardwood floors, high ceilings, and unique Anderson crank-out windows from the 1930s. The farmhouse holds great sentimental value to the Rendleman-Sirles family, with family members recalling some of their best childhood days on the farm and gathering here for a visit. All the family would agree this way of growing up was quite a privilege.

A throwback in time located at the center of the farm fields and packing shed, the farmhouse is still important today and serves as the "corporate office" and hub for all farming business conducted for Rendleman Orchards.



The original log cabin expanded over the years to accommodate several generations of the Rendleman family and is the farm office headquarters today. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary



Third generation Rendleman children, Helen, Susie, and Lu Rendleman, playing on the front steps that are still used today. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

Meet Your Farmers:Wayne "Ren" and Betty Sirles

Ren & Bettys

BEST BUSINESS ADVICE

FOR FARMING:

Be prudent with spending

Save for the bad years

Make sure there is a market

before you plant a new crop

Recognize every family

member of each generation

has their talents, strengths,

and contributions to the farm

Ren lost his father when he was five years old. His widowed mother, Helen Rendleman Sirles moved back to the farm then. He always had wonderful male role models and an extremely close relationship with his grandfather Grover as he was raised in the same home. And Uncle Jimmy was farming full-time with his father, Grover, also living nearby on the orchard.

Being the only boy among three sis- in community projects on behalf of the

ters, Ren always looked up to his grandfather Grover and his uncle Jimmy as surrogate fathers. In later years, Uncle Jimmy also became Ren's mentor and partner in business.

As a kid, Ren rode along in the truck to errands and worked alongside him on the farm, and listened to his stories of earlier, often difficult, times on the farm.

Rendleman Orchards still had livestock when

Ren was a child and growing up. He helped feed the hogs and take care of hundreds of chickens. When Ren was a teenager, the farm still grew several vegetables, including peppers, turnips, and green beans.

Ren's mother, Helen Rendleman Sirles often told of the period in time she had to force Ren off the farm to earn degrees from the College of Agriculture at Southern Illinois University. She recalled that while he enjoyed college, it was his campus life as a Delta Chi that kept him in school! She said he always came home from college to be at the farm and help, and he was eager to return to the farm and make his mark.

As a member of Delta Chi, Ren embraced the diversity of college life, meeting new people, and facing the challenges and opportunities of living and working with people with different backgrounds and points of view. He learned the importance of listening to others' stories and serving there. "Living in the fraternity offered the best lessons about business and dealing with people," Ren says.

Fourth-generation Ren and Betty (Parker) Sirles met at SIU. They married right out of college and began their life at the farm in 1964.

Betty was born and raised in Centralia, Illinois. When she met Ren at SIU, she

Ren lost his father when he was five ears old. His widowed mother, Helen endleman Sirles moved back to the arm then. He always had wonderful was working on her teaching degree. After they were married, she taught for a short time before she gave birth to her firstborn, Wayne.

For some years after that, she was a stay-at-home mother as she and Ren had their second child, Amy. In those years, she always helped at the packing shed and around the farm with the kids never far away. In addition, she was often involved in community projects on behalf of the

family... and because that was just her nature.

As her kids became school-age, she helped out more on the farm. Then, when her youngest child was about to start elementary school, she started working as the crew boss in the orchard and vegetable fields. During this time, her mother-in-law Helen did all the bookwork on the farm including payroll, along with accounts payable and accounts receivable.

By 1990, when Wayne and Michelle married, Betty was working full-time on the farm throughout the harvest season from July until November. In the winter months, she helped with bookwork as needed. As the years passed, her job list became longer as she became more involved in the bookkeeping for the farm; she gladly accepted the challenge even when opening the retail store on the farm that today is referred to as the Farm Market.

Farming after the wedding, no honeymoon

When Ren and Betty were first married, the peach season only lasted about two weeks. There were only two varieties - Elberta and Georgia Belle - with about 98% of the peach crop of the Elberta variety. During those two weeks, it was all hands on deck for the family to help with the harvest, and even non-farming family members would come to the farm during those two weeks and help out.

In the following years, Ren and Betty faced bigger challenges with new varieties coming out. Challenges in a multigenerational farming operation extend beyond mother narture's unpredictability and market uncertainty. There were plenty - like trying to get Uncle Jimmy



Ren and Betty worked together for many years, laboring on the farm, making decisions together, and supporting their community and other farmers, all while raising a family. In their retirement, they are always close to the farm, helping Wayne and Michelle when needed and staying involved in causes close to their hearts. Photo credit: Nina Wilson

and Grover to move away from the Elberta peaches and plant newer varieties of peaches with better breeding for flavor and longevity and also to spread out harvest time.

As he grew as a farmer and leader at Rendleman Orchards, Ren planted new varieties. Then, when his Uncle Jimmy passed suddenly in 1979, he and Betty bought more land to expand the farm and plant more acres. It was always a challenge in the business, trying to forecast the best varieties and the market there would be for those by the time they would bear a crop. For peaches, you have to plan about four years, and for apples, up to even seven years ahead - not an annual crop you can replace or easily adjust acres.

Under Ren and Betty's leadership, more land was acquired for Rendleman Orchards, adding adjacent acreage to expand the farm as it became available. They bought 84 acres from a neighboring farmer, then 40 more acres a few years later from another farmer, and then another 49 acres, then 18 acres more. They planted a lot of trees!

During that time, the wholesale side of Rendleman Orchards was much larger by wholesale, meaning selling for retailers for resale and sales to institutions. They were picking 80,000 bushels of apples back then, and there were several orchards were in Union County and Jackson area during that time.

Ray Grammer, a well-respected fruit grower to the north of Rendleman Orchards along IL-127, was the first to plant fall red delicious apples in the area. Ren and Betty followed suit in 1967, making a road trip to pick up their first Red Delicious fall apple trees.

Before that time, Rendleman Orchards always had summer cooking apples; early varieties like Transparent, Wealthy, and Morehouse. They sold a lot of apples to people in the steel mills in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Chicago, all by rail car.

They later phased out and quit those early apples as people had stopped cooking apples, quit making as much applesauce, and canning apples. It was a shift, like many in the lifetime of the orchard, to follow customer demand and change with the times to stay relevant and profitable.



Not all farmwives work in the trenches of the farming operation. But as a farmwife, Betty Sirles was disciplined, stern when needed, a teacher, and knew Spanish. So, the best use of her work talents was to help Ren on the farm, always taking an active role in day-to-day farm jobs like leading the harvest team and assisting with the decisions about the orchard business. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library



Ren Sirles (right) would attest to the value of working with your neighbors, especially in agriculture. Ren's lifelong friend and neighbor, Bill Flamm (left), owner of and broker for Flamm Orchards, brokered quite a bit of Rendleman Orchards produce alongside their own Flamm produce. Today, Wayne sells all the wholesale crops for Rendleman Orchards. Sadly, Bill Flamm passed in 2020, but the relationship with Flamm's continues - never in competition, but in cooperation and support for bulk buying farm supplies to help grow and harvest crops. Photo credit: Patti Flamm

Page 5 - Rendleman Orchards 150th Anniversary

Meet Your Farmers: **Wayne and Michelle Sirles**

Wayne Sirles grew up always knowing he would help with the family farm. His parents never pressured him to return to the farm after college, but that was always his plan. Wayne took the knowledge from his Plant and Soil Science degree from Southern Illinois University and returned to work on the farm directly after graduating. While at SIU, he had an emphasis on Horticulture and minored in Agribusiness and Chemistry, knowing these would be important areas to help on the farm and create a sustainable path for it in the years

His childhood years were spent on the farm or never too far away from it. He developed a love for the outdoors as a kid and enjoyed hunting, camping, and riding ATVs with friends around the farm and in



Rendleman Orchards received the Illinois Department of Agriculture's Sesquicentennial Farm status this year. The Program recognizes farms that have been held by descendants of the same family for 150 years or more. Wayne prepares for the 150th season by completing many projects on the farm just as any other year. But, especially during this season, he has more projects to help make it a momentous year. Visitors can see the sign commemorating the Sesquicentennial Farm status as they enter the farm market. Photo credit: **Rendleman Family Libary**



His childhood years were spent on the farm or never too far away from it. It wasn't uncommon for Wayne, even as a young boy, to be right at Ren's side and always learning about the farm. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary

During Wayne's education at Southern Illinois University, he was committed to doing the work required for his studies and learning new things to bring back to the farm. As a result, he made close bonds with professors and researchers that still are valuable connections today on the farm.

Early in his career, Wayne was passionate about adding new peach and apple varieties to the farm, along with more productive rootstocks. By adding more productive rootstocks in the orchards, he could choose varieties more resistant to disease and cold temperatures. A shift in production like this did not happen in one growing season or two; it happened over several years.

Wayne spent years planting peach and apple trial test plots all around the farm to determine which varieties would produce best on the farm. The wide selection of peach and apple varieties offered in the Farm Market today are the direct result of his efforts. He takes great pride in working to match the best varieties to the farm and especially in seeing happy customers buying fruit in the farm market.

As he always had a special appreciation for the outdoors and caring for the farm's natural resources, he felt it important to apply his background and connections to implement no-till farming practices. He was one of the first specialty crop farmers to take that leap. Managing the farm with more no-till practices in the fields is especially helpful in managing moisture and better withstanding both droughts and heavy precipitation events. He enjoys talking about this and other aspects of the farm and new practices and is often asked by new and seasoned farmers alike to help them on their farms.

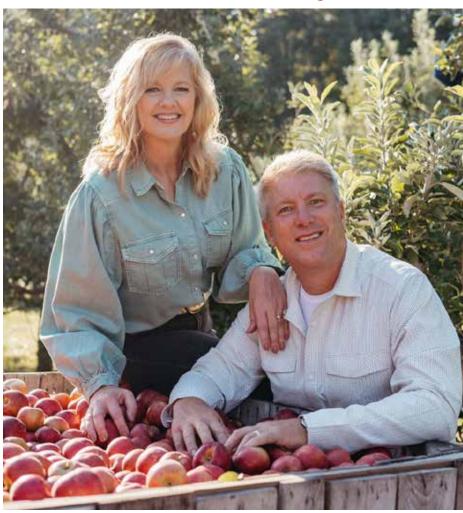
It was no surprise that Wayne took to the idea of adding flower farming to the list of Rendleman Orchards crops - after much coaxing by his wife, Michelle. Of course, it didn't hurt that it would also improve the butterfly and bird habitat for visitors to enjoy. Even Wayne's parents, Ren and Betty, were reluctant about the venture of flower farming but today, they are proud of the benefits pollinators have as the busy bees, butterflies, and beneficial bugs have on the crops and around the 150-year-old farm.

The passion and enthusiasm for the flowers mostly came from Michelle Sirles at the beginning of the flower venture.

Wayne met his wife Michelle in their last semester at SIU in the late 1980s. Following graduation, Michelle went to back St. Louis, where she was originally from, to work as a graphic designer. They dated long-distance, and it wasn't long before they married and she moved back to Southern Illinois.

While Wayne worked full-time in the family orchard business, Michelle worked off the farm before joining the business full-time alongside Wayne in 2014. During her work away from the farm, Michelle gained much experience in many areas that would later become quite valuable in her transition to helping Wayne through the years and eventually full-time.

She brought a 25-year career "off the farm" in graphic design, marketing, human resources, corporate event planning, event marketing, and fundraising, all used daily and year-round on the farm. Her full-time transition to working on the farm came when her youngest daughter, Audrey, went away to college, and Ren and Betty were finally ready to slow down, enjoy



Michelle joined Wayne working full-time on the farm in 2014. They are the fifth generation of family to carry on the orchard. Big changes came in 2018 when, not only did Wayne transition into leadership on the farm, Michelle's dream of adding a u-pick flower field became a reality. This Alto Pass farm expanded into online sales to reach households across the nation with Rendleman Orchards specialty food items, peach and apple boxes. Photo credit: Nina Wilson

In her first year at the farm, she focused on helping Wayne get the wholesale side of the business computerized for sales orders and receivables. She also began working in the Farm Market - started by Betty - and eventually assumed those responsibilities in her job description. Then she later took over bookkeeping responsibilities.

Michelle helped a lot with the transition of wholesale sales from Ren to Wayne and developed important marketing and sales processes for Wayne. And she continues to help Wayne gain new wholesale connections and customers today.

In time, Michelle shifted roles to focus on growth for the retail side of the family business - implementing a marketing plan, social media strategy, and adding u-pick flowers to the list of products and experiences that are now on the farm.

Together, Wayne and Michelle Sirles



Ren and Wayne walk the orchard discussing varieties and plans for the future. Photo credit: Nashville, TN photographer for Roundy's Supermarkets, Inc.

feel hopeful about the future of the fivegeneration farm and what's ahead. They helped Ren and Betty with a legacy transition plan that allowed the couples to understand each other's goals, wishes, and concerns to help change ownership to the next generation. It was not easy, but something that they all agree was invaluable for continuing their farm legacy, and all actively share their experience about the process and encourage other family business owners to do the same.

Wayne and Michelle are looking forward to the 150th growing season on the farm and especially seeing memories made on the farm that is so dear to them.



Wavne and Michelle wear many hats on and off the farm. Beyond day-today farming, they are fierce advocates for agriculture policy, reducing food insecurity, and helping other farmers. They are proud of their role in the Farm to Food Bank pilot program as it makes a giant impact to improve the lives of so many families. As shown above, Wayne and Michelle (right) discussed the Feeding Illinois initiative with **Senator Dale Fowler and Glen Roberts** of the Tri-State Food Bank. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary

John & Isabelle Rendleman purchase the original 88 acres on what is now Rendleman Orchards, Inc.

The first apple trees are set at Rendleman **Orchards**

1912

More summer apples & vegetables are planted at Rendleman **Orchards**

Mid 1940s

Wayne "Ren" Sirles (gen. 4) returns to work farm alongside his grandfather Grover and his Uncle James "Jimmy" Rendleman

1963

Jimmy Rendleman passes away suddenly at the age of 72 years old, Ren assumes leadership of the farm, **Betty becomes first** female crew boss

1979

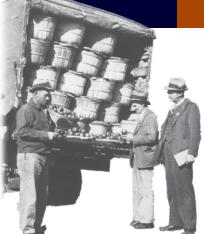
1990

Vegetables are

again planted

at Rendleman

Orchards



1873

1906

The first peach trees are planted at Rendleman **Orchards**

1933

Rendleman (gen. 2) begins buying & selling mules through the end of WWII 1950s

James "Jimmy" Rendleman looks to modernize (gen. 3) farming practices, create efficiencies through mechanization, and adds Meyers **Sprayer Dealership** to the operation

MID-LATE 1960s

Newer peach varieties are set and more fall apples planted

1989

Wayne Sirles (gen. 5) returns to work the farm alongside his parents Ren & Betty (Parker) Sirles

Harvest process is more than meets the eye

thousands of acres of corn and soybeans as the most notable crops. But Southern Illinois climate lends itself to growing far more unique crops - specialty crops - ones that require handpicking in order to ensure the best quality produce on the dinner table.



Prior to, and into the 1960s, whenever a harvest worker put a basket of peaches on the wagon, one of these cardboard tickets with that picker's number on it was placed into the basket. When that basket was taken into the packing shed, the ticket was pulled from the basket and recorded under that picker's number for that week's paycheck.



Shown is an old "ticket apron". Each harvest crew had a ticket person assigned who stayed with that harvest crew. They wore the ticket apron (above) and every time a harvest worker placed a bag of peaches or apples they harvested onto the wagon and into a harvest bin, the ticket person would hand the worker a token (below) for that bag. Every day, twice a day - at lunchtime and at the end of day the harvest workers would turn in their picking tokens for the day. They would stand in line while a Rendleman family member counted their tokens and recorded the amount picked in the "ticket book". The weekly paychecks reflected their hourly base pay plus their piece rate pay. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library



Illinois agriculture is largely known for **History of harvest ways**

In Rendleman Orchard's early years, there were white migrant families that traveled to Alto Pass to harvest the crops. The term "migrant" referred to farm workers who were traveling the country looking for work. Around the 1920s, white migrant families came from the southern states, primarily Arkansas and the Missouri Bootheel. Migrants would stay in tents. The peach and apple harvest were a matter of weeks.

War times brought labor challenges and a variety of programs to address labor shortages, including the Work Projects Administration (WPA), the War Food Administration (WFA), and even workers' Civilian Conservation Camps (CCC).

Well into the 1950s, the white migrant workers continued their annual arrangement and trek through the southern states picking cotton and after finishing, they would head north to pick peaches. Often, there would be three or four generations in a family traveling together for work in the orchard. The men would work in the field and the women typically worked in the packing shed.

Following the war, many of the migrants found permanent work in factories and plants, and this left farmers, once again, without enough help. Migrants who once made the trek from the southern states to pick cotton were replaced by machines in the cotton harvest.

Farmers got creative during these times and employed coal miners. Working in the orchard was a way for miners to make extra money. Farmers were once again without enough workers when unions worked out contracts with mine owners for workers to get back to work in the summer.

Later, African Americans from Cairo to Carbondale were hired to help fill the void and help the Rendleman family and other growers bring in their crops. As more and more peach and apple varieties were developed and planted in the orchard, the harvest season lengthened.

Eventually, in the 1970s, Rendleman Orchards began employing Hispanic harvest workers who traveled to Union County as they had heard of the many specialty crop farms throughout the county needing workers. The Hispanic migrant workers provided much-needed relief during this time as farmers had a difficult time finding workers.

Rendleman Orchards has always employed a number of seasonal harvest workers throughout the decades. "Pick-



Peach Harvest 1946 with loads of picked peached brought to the packing shed to be sorted and packed for shipment. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

a combination of minimum wage, plus an Southern Illinois harvest season. additional amount for each bushel basket or picking bag harvested. To keep the migrant harvest workers here until the harvest was complete, they received a percentage for the total number of bags picked for that season as a bonus in their last paycheck. That last larger paycheck also helped them with travel expenses to the next farm, which was typically north to Michigan for their apple harvest which is about a month later than

In time, Rendleman Orchards continued increasing in acreage and varieties and diversification of their crops.

Between 1995 and 2015, Rendleman Orchards, along with other farms in America, saw a gradual decline in migrant workers coming to harvest the crops each year. This was due to a number of factors: tightening immigration in the U.S.; migrant families purchasing homes, becoming part of the



With all the varieties grown - peaches, nectarines and apples - the harvest time lasts 4.5 months. Photo credit: Jenn Fortune Photography



Ren, Betty, and Wayne Sirles (Center) with orchard ream and H-2A harvest ers" were paid by a "piece rate" system: workers. Photo credit: Nina Wilson.

Page 7 - Rendleman Orchards 150th Anniversary each and Earlies

The first U-pick pumpkin patch was planted at the farm

2007

Michelle joins the operation to help Wayne lead the farm

2018

Wayne assumes leadership of the family farm. The first **U-pick sunflower** field and online store opened at **Rendleman Orchards**

2020

Rendleman

redesigns the

Farm Market to

meet customer

Orchards

demands

A strawflower patch was introduced at the farm

2022



Rendleman Orchards, with peach smoothies as an instant hit

2010

Rendeman **Orchards Farm Market begins** offering Apple Cider Donuts. a farm favorite ever since

Rendleman **Orchards sets** up their first "photo op" in the U-pick pumpkin patch

2019

The first of its kind in the Midwest, U-pick zinnia field was planted at Rendleman **Orchards**

A new U-pick cosmo field was added at the farm, thus creating The Fields at Rendleman **Orchards**

2023

Rendleman Orchards is recognized as a Sesquicentennial family farm by the **Illinois Department of Agriculture**

Rendleman Orchards marks 150 years in business, with continuous operation by the same family with a commemorative Bell Ringing Ceremony

Rendleman Orchards continues to grow adding the first U-pick mum field in Southern Illinois

Timeline photo credits: Nina Wilson and Rendleman Family Library

community, and eventually moving on to factory work, landscaping, and construction. Many longtime migrant workers who would return to the farm year after year aged out of being able to do the strenuous harvest work. Their children chose to attend college or learn a trade after high school. By 2015, Rendleman Orchards did not have enough workers to get their produce harvested.

Today's harvest ways

In 2016, Rendleman Orchards started utilizing to the H-2A Agricultural Guestworker Program. What did that mean for the farm? This was the end of Rendleman Orchards employing their own harvest workers and paying minimum wage plus piece rate system. Through the H-2A program, participating farms are under government contract to bring temporary seasonal workers to the U.S. for an agreed-upon contract period. Farmers are required to pay the Adverse Wage Effect for their state. That rate was determined necessary by the Department of Labor to ensure the employment of H-2A foreign workers will not have an adverse effect on the wages of U.S. domestic

The H-2A Agricultural Guestworker Program, however, is a great expense to farms, and very cumbersome in regulation and government paperwork, making it almost cost prohibitive. Many U.S. family farms have actually chosen to stop farming as a result.

All told, this program has worked for Rendleman Orchards and the help has been wonderful. Without the workers, it would be nearly impossible to stay in business for so long and serve customers with the best-quality produce!

In the last nine years, Wayne and Michelle Sirles, the fifth generation Rendleman family members now leading the operation, have expanded focus to include more efforts in retail sales to again continue to diversify and remain sustainable for future generations.

It was around 2018 when visitors saw U-pick flower field experiences offered at Rendleman Orchards. This was the first time the family farm had ever opened up areas of the property to visitors, venturing into agritainment. Since then, Wayne and Michelle have added more acreage of pumpkins and flowers, one for which they are most well known for- the zinnia field! Hence, The Fields at Rendleman Orchards was born and has become a destination in its own right, drawing tourists from all over the Midwest and beyond.

Today, Rendleman Orchards grows 14 varieties of peaches, three varieties of nectarines and 14 varieties of apples. Rendleman's raises several varieties of pumpkins as well. With the addition of all the varieties grown, the harvest time now lasts four and a half months.

Growing produce and growing a iegacy

Long before "corporate social responsibility" was a topic or workplace reference, Ren and Betty Sirles knew that investing in their team would be vital to both the success of their employees and in turn, the success of the farm. The couple was aware that there was a bigger demand for harvest workers' help than there was supply. It has also always been in their nature to take care of those who worked alongside them knowing it would help the farm and the community.

Over the decades, it certainly proved true that their harvest crew workers returned year after year because of the relationship they built with Hispanic families and their strong, mutual respect. It is no secret that if there were no migrant workers at the Orchard in those days, there would have been no way to harvest crops and get them to market; this has been the case since the beginning. Annually, pre-

In 2018, Wayne was recognized by the Illinois Department of Human Rights for his years of work and advocacy in the Hispanic Community. He was honored for his deep commitment and outstanding leadership to promote fairness and equality and act as a role model of the American dream. While receiving the honor, he was surrounded by his closest family: daughters Audrey (far left) and Hilary (far right), and wife Michelle by his side. Photo credit: **Rendleman Family Library**

paring the workers for the tasks of pruning, harvesting, and packing takes good training and effective communication skills. Both Ren and Betty led and mentored those skills for more than 50 years.

Ren and Betty were known throughout Union County, Southern Illinois, and the whole state as leaders in their community and industry when it came to corporate responsibility and doing what was right to help their Hispanic workers.

Ren's commitment to employees, now for decades, has been seen in many ways. Over the years, in his role as owner and later serving on the local bank board, he has helped employees open their first bank accounts, helped them buy their first car, and even helped them rent or buy their first home. His support in speaking to lenders and providing references to vouch for his employees provided a boost to this team toward making a better life for them and their families. He and Betty, both have helped workers to arrange for medical care or support through illness, provided translation for important paperwork, navigated local agencies and offices vital to licenses, taxes, and insurance, and even employed the sons and daughters of workers to help them get through college.

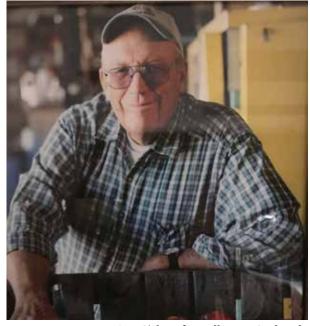
Before their retirement, both Ren and Betty were a successful and dynamic team working in the orchard. In the 1980s it was not common at all for a woman to have a full-time job in the farming operation and out in the field. That was never the case for Rendleman Orchards. Betty was the "harvest crew boss". Because of her own work ethic, she was quickly respected by the men.

There was no time in their year-round farming operation for anyone to do anything other than their job. For this reason, Ren advocated for Betty to all her work crews, that she was their boss. She was fluent in Spanish and showed up to do all the same jobs that were expected of her male work team. During this time, Betty also carried the load as treasurer for the farm and later manager of the Farm Market as well as CFO.

Perhaps the most important value that Ren and Betty instilled in the next generation of Rendleman Orchard leadership is the obligation to be a good leader and a good person. Especially as their predecessor, Wayne learned this at a very early age. He was recognized in 2018 by the Illinois Department of Human Rights for his years of work and advocacy in the Hispanic Community.

Today, Ren and Betty have passed the torch to their son Wayne and his wife Michelle to carry the Orchard into the next stages of fruit production and sustainability. Their home is located in the busyness of the farm, overlooking orchards and flower fields.

"Retired" would not be an accurate term to describe either Ren or Betty as they remain active in the community representing the farm, always giving back, cheering on other farmers, and willing to offer advice based on their years of experience.



In January 2022, Ren Sirles of Rendleman Orchards was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the Illinois Specialty Growers Association. The award recognizes outstanding contributions to the Illinois specialty crops industry. This award was even more special to Ren because his peers voted for him. Ren and his family have been longtime members of the organization, which began as the Illinois Horticulture Society in the 1800s before the Civil War. Ren is also a member of the Illinois Horticulture Society Hall of Fame. Photo credit: Unknown

How brokering mules saved the farm

The Rendleman family honors a significant piece of their past on the walls of their Farm Market. The wainscoting, checkout counter, and decorative awning above the cash registers are all covered in rusty tin that had been reclaimed from old barns. It's tin that once covered old mule barns on the farm.

Before tractors were used on the farm, mules and mule teams were used on the

farm. In fact, mules were involved in every aspect of farming including plowing, planting, hauling products to markets, carrying supplies, and even dragging logs and materials around the farm.

What's a mule?

Mules are hybrid animals. They are the offspring of a male donkey (a jack) and a female horse (a mare). Both male and

female offspring are produced, however, the offspring are sterile. The long ears and surefootedness traits come from the jack, and size and alertness are traits from the mare. With no "driving" farm equipment tech-

nology available, a farmer's only choice was a good team of horses or mules to plow and haul on the farm. A good team of horses or mules could not only get more work done, but they could also be a source of revenue by working out a financial arrangement with other farmers in need of a team to do work.

Not all mules are used for the same work. There are actually different mules for various applications in agriculture, all classified based mostly on the size of the mule. There were mining mules which were the smallest, then cotton mules, sugar mules, farm mules (also called tobacco mules) and the largest in size - draft mules.

To the rescue

In the early 1900s, most farms in Union County were 40-80 acres and needed at least a pair or team of horses of mules to break ground and help on the farm. Grover Rendleman (born 1884), was passionate about mules. He liked them and respected them as sure-footed and strong creatures of good temperament. He had "an eye" for them and many other mule owners, interested buyers, and neighbors would turn to Grover for expertise about mules.

During the late 1920s, Grover Rendleman realized he was going to need to supplement his farm income due to adverse economic conditions in the United States - the Great Depression. And it was especially tough economic times in Union County as the financial challenges of the Great Depression struck a couple of years earlier than the rest of the nation would feel the impact.

Grover reasoned that every farm, large or small, needed a team of horses or mules to grow and harvest their crops. Those animals were necessary to make a living because farmers needed to support their families. Grover was known for having a knack for teaming up mules to do good work on the farm. This experience came in handy during the hard times of the Great Depression.

During this time of mule trading leading up to the Great Depression, Grover supplemented his farming operation, growing mainly apples and peaches for the wholesale market. Also during this time, he was invited annually - and obliged - to go to county fairs throughout the tri-state area and judge mules as part of the fairs' livestock shows. He became quite widely known in the mule trading business in Southern Illinois, Southeast Missouri, Western Kentucky, and Western Tennessee.

He knew that one of the best areas of profit was to match mules of a certain size and temperament to work the tobacco



Tobacco mules or "farm mules" were smaller than draft mules and suited for both tobacco and fields of tomatoes and similar specialty crops grown in Union County. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

fields, thereby becoming well-known in the circle of tobacco farmers. Tobacco mules or "farm mules" were smaller than draft mules and suited for tobacco fields in the southern states. They were perfect in size and surefootedness for both tobacco and fields of tomatoes and similar produce grown in Union County which was known at this time for growing a wide variety of vegetable crops in addition to tree fruits and traditional row crops.

Grover's grandson "Ren" recalls stories about his grandfather breaking mules, and even hiring farm workers to help break mules because they had so many.

Ren recently shared, "There once was a distinguished judge in Mississippi who traveled all the way to see my grandfather because of his mules and reputation. The particular mules the judge was interested in were some that my grandfather was quite proud of and did not want to sell! The judge made an offer, and my grandfather declined. The judge made another offer, and this time grandfather could not pass on the deal." The mules were loaded on train cars in Alto Pass, and shipped to Mississippi to their new farm home. The mules would later be used to work in tobacco fields.

If Grover was not dealing in a sale of goods or mules, his preferred business method was bartering - such as a couple bushels of potatoes as final payment on mules sold to a neighbor, or the like. He dealt mostly with handshakes and a man's word and no contracts. He vowed to never sell mules to the coal mine because he felt it was cruel to the animals.

Mules mostly disappeared from the farm after World War II when they were replaced by tractors and other technologies to do the jobs that mules and horses once did.

The income from brokering mules kept Grover Rendleman & Son, now known as Rendleman Orchards, afloat during some of America's most difficult years. For that reason, the family found it important to piece together these rusty tin remnants of their past and hang a large black and white photo of the mules and barn in the retail market for guests to see. It also serves as a daily reminder to the younger generations that there will be hard times and they will find a way to overcome and carry on the Orchard's legacy.

Weathering the storm of loss on the farm

man (Uncle Jimmy) were farming together, they inherited Grover's Uncle Autie's place and absorbed that land into the business. Autie and his wife had no children and were farming similar produce with similar equipment adjacent to Rendleman Orchards. Those farm buildings are still standing and used as storage today.

During this time, the farm was still growing in acres and variety with quite a few vegetables - peppers, turnips, and green beans. Uncle Jimmy was farming full-time with his father, Grover, and living nearby on the orchard.

Being the only boy among three sisters, Ren always looked up to his Uncle Jimmy, who would later be a partner to him in business.

After Grover passed in 1968, those years on the farm with Uncle Jimmy and Ren, third and fourth generation working to-

When Grover and his son James Rendle- gether, were a kind of transformative time, not just out of innovation but also out of necessity. The newer varieties extended the harvest, created more work, and required more labor. They worked through the challenges and were a good team.

Jimmy led his family operation through steps to modernize and mechanize different aspects of the farm especially in packing fresh produce. He diversified his income with real estate investments in Alto Pass and nearby Murphysboro, and even add a Meyers Sprayer Dealership to his resume of jobs to juggle all while farming fulltime. Uncle Jimmy passed suddenly in 1973, leaving a large load on Ren, his mother, Helen, and Ren's wife, Betty. Though devastating, Ren and Helen were committed to the transition of responsibilities while honoring the legacy of such powerful role models that helped the farm through difficult times.



Ren's childhood was mainly about shadowing his Uncle Jimmy and Grandfather Grover Rendleman. Here is Ren as a boy, standing in the peaches in front of the old packing shed, with the grownups, Helen, Grover, and Jimmy (left to right). **Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library**



Being the only boy among three sisters and having lost his father at a very early age, Ren (middle) always looked up to his Uncle James "Jimmy" Rendleman (left) and Grandfather Grover (right). Both men were father figures and mentors to Ren. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library



Mules were used to drive wagons to and from town and from farm to farm. In this photo, apples are carried in wooden kegs to sell in Alto Pass or deliver to the train to ship off. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

Growing friendships and families on the farm

It would not be fitting to talk about Rendleman Orchards' history without talking about the many people they have employed across a century and a half. A business with this type of longevity has formed unique bonds within its community. Not surprisingly, several families have had multiple generations work for the Rendleman family over the decades.

A recent interview with Danny and Barbara (Wright) Randolph of Anna, Illinois, helped tell a story of the Rendleman Orchard's history from a community and employee perspective, not to mention a love story.

Danny Randolph was born in an old log cabin on what is now part of the Rendleman Orchard's land. His father, Ogle Randolph, and grandfather, John Randolph, worked for Grover Rendleman. Danny grew up much like the Rendleman kids, living on the farm with his parents and grandparents in another nearby log cabin, which he could visit often. After school, Danny would work putting liners in tubs and packing apples.

When he was just a toddler, Danny's parents would bring him to work with them daily while they harvested turnips in the bottoms. It was before modern daycare, and if it rained while his parents were pulling turnips, they would simply put a bushel basket over him to protect him from the weather!

Love at first sight

When Danny was 15 years old, he worked at the orchard. One day he came around the corner of a building and saw a sight that stopped him "in his tracks," he described. He saw a beautiful 13-year-old girl before him that he knew would someday be his wife.

The girl was young Barbara Wright, Arthur and Violet Wright's daughter, who lived in Missouri. The family traveled as migrant workers to Rendleman Orchards for work. It was common for white migrant families to come



Mules help during the war

During WWII, Grover Rendleman was a mules buyer for the U.S. Army. During this time there were a couple of mule barns in Union County and other buyers and sellers of mules for use in agriculture. Grover had the experience and local contacts to bring together a large number of mules for the army to Alto Pass for shipping out on the train - GM&O, which would later be called Illinois Central. The mules were mainly going to California and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, the British and Australian Military that would use the mules mostly for packing supplies and ammunition through the jungle, often in muddy conditions. At one time, recalling one of the largest shipments described by Grover, there were 167 mules gathered in Alto Pass and under contract for the Army. Photo credit: Rendleman **Family Library**



Danny Randolph was a main forklift driver from 1970 to 2013, and the couple did many jobs on the farm through the years. Photo credit: Randolph Family

across the river from Missouri and work the orchards for two weeks during the Elberta peach harvest in August.

Barbara began working for the Rendleman family right away at 13. Her job was to face peaches and apples. "Facing" the fruit was turning the fruit with the blush side up for better presentation. That was about 1965, and she lived with her parents in one of the many small migrant homes scattered among the acreage. While her parents had their jobs in the orchards, Barbara spent many days thinning trees and hand-pruning the young trees.

Danny and Barbara had their first kiss in the packing shed. He waited until she was old enough to marry; when Barbara was 15, and Danny was 17, they became husband and wife. They started married life, living (again) in one of the small houses on the farm.

Throughout a large portion of Danny and Barbara's growing up and married life, they have lived in almost every little house on the farm. But Danny says, "Each house had a nickname, and the only house we never lived in was the silver mansion." On the farm, it was also known as the old "Butcher House," which came from a farmland purchase from the Butcher Family.

The couple filled various vital jobs on the farm through the years on the farm. Danny was a main forklift driver from 1970 to 2013. Over the years, he recalled working in the old Elberta peaches picked in wooden bushel baskets and fondly remembered three varieties of summer apples; Lodi's, Moorehouse, and Red Williams. In the earlier days, he worked for Jimmy Rendleman, and in later years on the farm, driving the forklift at the packing shed for Ren, moving many bins of Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, and Jonathan's brought in from the fields.

Danny and Barbara raised their kids on the Rendleman farm. Their children grew up on the farm, enjoying the freedom of being farm kids. Their children also worked on the farm; later, their grandchildren followed the family tradition of working at Rendleman Orchards.

Five generations of the Randolph family have now worked at Rendleman Orchards, just like the Rendle-

Great memories on the farm

When asked what he liked about working at the orchard, Danny said he enjoyed "mowing the hillsides and running the equipment" and smiled as he mentioned the red belly Ford tractor. And he has many beautiful memories of working with all the men. He enjoyed working alongside the Marks family; Shorty and Katherine Marks, his son, Wilburn Marks, Wilburn Marks's grandpa, Tom and Jane Marks, and Paula Marks-Stairs.

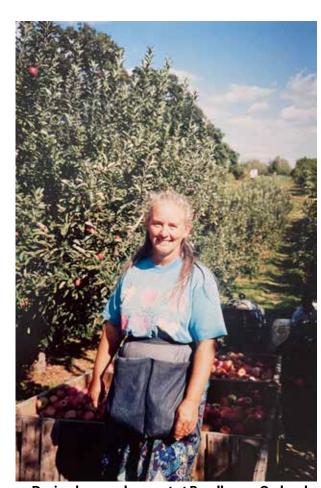
Chuckling, Barbara remembered working some long and hot "colorful days" out in the orchards with Betty Sirles as harvest boss, trying to "wrangle" Barbara's two uncles, who were crew supervisors. The uncles often "did not see eye to eye" as crew leaders on what to harvest next.

Danny recalled the years his dad drove Grover Rendleman's "Diamond T" truck to take the harvest to cold storage in Murphysboro, Illinois. It was the only storage available at the time. With great pride, Danny said he was "the first to drive the then-new 1974 Ford International

on a long trip to Tupelo, Mississippi." That truck had the farm's first refrigerated box on the back to haul the freshpicked produce. Today, the truck is a beautiful memory of the past and a unique photo op near the flower fields.

Danny was born in Rendleman Orchards and retired from Rendleman Orchards after working for over 50 years for the Rendleman family. He and Barbara had many tales about their life in the fruit business. Danny used to joke with Helen Rendleman Sirles that he wanted his ashes spread one day on the farm where he first saw Barbara.

Today, Danny and Barbara regularly visit Rendleman Orchards and bring their kids, grandkids, and greatgrandchildren to enjoy the farm.

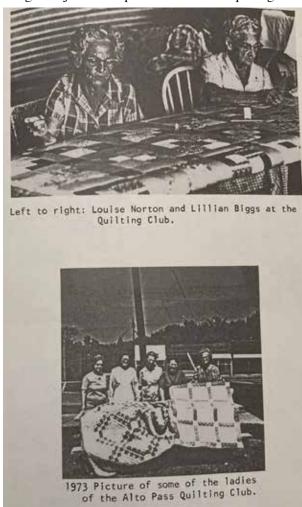


During her employment at Rendleman Orchards, Barbara Randolph also worked in the packing shed sorting fruit and as the ticket lady standing on the harvest wagons, passing out tokens to the pickers during the season. Photo credit: Randolph Family



Tales of the Cloth: The Alto Pass Quilting Club

Quilting has been a huge part of the Rendleman family lifestyle for decades; however, fourth-generation Betty Sirles (wife of Ren) has taken quilting to the next level in her lifetime. In 1972, at 32, Betty helped start and run the Alto Pass Quilting Club to raise money for the village to have its own fire department and equipment. With incredible willpower and perseverance, they completed this goal in just a short period of time. This quilting effort



The Quilters kept a card box with everyone's name, address, and skills they all had. This could be anything from cutting, piecing, sewing, and binding to cooking chicken and dumplings. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

Quilting has been a huge part of the Rendleman family has made a lasting impact on the community of Alto Pass festyle for decades; however, fourth-generation Betty in many ways.

It all began in the back room of what is now Duty's Country Store. The "quilting operation" eventually moved into the upper level of the town bank, where they had an entire floor to themselves. They would meet every day, year-round, for the next 3-4 years. The group that met was made up of around 20 quilters and nearly 70 community members, ages 60-80. They consisted of cutters, piecers, sewers, and binders of quilting materials.

After a lot of hard work, they needed to decide how they were going to sell the quilts. Quilts at that time sold for just \$20 each. Betty knew their worth and was convinced they could get \$100 apiece! Though some quilters in the group were reluctant to raise the price, Betty was determined.

Betty and a few of her fellow quilters researched and found some boutiques down in Gatlinburg, TN. So they gathered up eight quilts and headed south. Her intuition was correct, and they began selling queen- and king-size quilts all over the country for \$100-\$200 apiece.

The Alto Pass Quilters quickly gained recognition for their work and the attention of news outlets. When interviewed, Betty would always try her best to promote the group to those who might have been interested in learning to sew. This effort and good news gained the attention of a local whose husband happened to be a graphic designer. After joining the group, the young lady's husband offered to design them a brochure to help further promote their craft, only in return for one thing: a quilt.

Sure enough, he designed that brochure!

Another member of the club was Helen Rendleman Sirles, Betty's mother-in-law. Helen was one of the four "piecers" who pieced identically to three other women in the club, making big projects easier. Helen loved piecing quilts and often worked on projects with Betty and Betty's mother Marie Parker. Together, quilts for each of Helen's grandchildren were made and gifted to them as wedding gifts.

Being both newly married and new to the area, Betty took advantage of this time in the Quilting Club to learn about the citizens of Alto Pass. Whenever supplies were needed, or help was needed for transporting finished quilt pieces, Betty would volunteer to take on the job. She quickly became acquainted with many people in the club, the community, and new quilt owners.

During this time, the entire community also gathered



When you visit Rendleman Orchards Farm Market, you may notice the quilt on display above the registers. There is a story behind it! Made in the late 1800s by first-generation Isabelle Rendleman (wife of John, mother to Grover), it is one of the hundreds of Rendleman Family quilts crafted over the decades. The quilt has since been passed down from one generation to the next and now shared for visitors to see. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

and hosted Chicken and Dumpling Dinners as another form of fundraising for the Alto Pass Fire Department Auxiliary. First, Betty and others would deliver 1-2 chickens to the houses of those who could make chicken and dumplings. Then they would gather at the old school in town, now known as Alto Clay Works. The women would cook the dumplings and the sides, and the men and children would also help clean and wash dishes.

The Alto Pass Quilting Club effort quickly became a big coming-together for the small town, and the fundraising continued.

Around 1975, after much hard work, it finally paid offand the group had accomplished their goal. After hundreds of quilts and a Shawnee Development Grant, the ladies had raised around \$20,000 to build and supply the Alto Pass Fire Department strictly from volunteers. However, even after meeting their end goal, the community continued the Chicken and Dumpling dinner fundraising efforts for many years.

Still, to this day, people remember their fundraising efforts.

Passion for protecting land & natural resources



Betty Sirles, her sister Sandy Brown, and Sharon (Nielson) Williamson, daughter of Lu Rendleman, enjoy the flowers throughout the season, especially seeing how much visitors enjoy visiting the farm. In 2022, the Orchard hosted an event in the flower fields celebrating pollinators and their importance. Among visitors, Betty and family enjoyed a stroll in the flower fields in their butterfly wings. Photo credit: Lasno Photography

Rendleman Orchards has long practiced land conservation for several generations. They have used cover crops on the farm for ages. And all fields are no-till, including our pumpkin fields and U-pick flower patch.

The use of crop protectants is something they also take very seriously. Wayne selects products that are as eco-friendly as possible and is very conscientious about applying protectants so that they can impact pollinators as little as possible.

As a good steward of the land and business owner, he always looks at new options that are both good for the business and the environment. Even looking ahead, Wayne spends time pursuing other ways to be kind to the environment and help the farm in future farming and management practices. Most recently, Wayne has explored projects for improving energy efficiency on the farm operation and in the fields, the potential of using solar power on the farm, and even the emerging carbon credit market.

Rendleman Orchards started creating habitats specifically for pollinators a few years ago, but in the 2021 season, they greatly expanded pollinator efforts. At that time, they had four acres of flower fields and an additional six acres of fallow land planted as pollinator habitat. These pollinator mixes provide food for all types of bee and butterfly species, which helps the overall population throughout Southern Illinois.

The farm has long advocated for shopping locally for the local economic impact and for the benefit of farmers and the local food system. Ultimately, the fewer miles fruits and vegetables travel from farm to table, the better those fruits and vegetables are for you and the planet. In addition, when local produce is picked at the peak of ripeness, it is likely being grown responsibly and has a tiny carbon footprint compared to an apple from New Zealand or grapes from Chile, for example.

Efforts to be more supportive and friendly to mother earth is a point of pride for Wayne and his father, Ren. "Never in my lifetime did I imagine all the good that

could come from flower farming," Ren chuckles. But he also advocates that it is more than flowers and bees, no-till and soil; it is a way to protect the earth and preserve a way of life.

Though retired, Ren still enjoys reading about new chemical practices and serves in a supporting role to Wayne when needed.



The brick house behind the farmhouse

was a bunkhouse for the single migrant

men working there. Now it is used for

Further back behind those buildings

sits the "cook house" where meals were

prepared for farm workers. Before that, the

building served as a blacksmith's shop. It

was fully equipped with a forge and anvil.

A farrier would come to the farm often to

meat on the farm.

farm storage.

Farm buildings help tell a story

Illinois Highway 127, as we now know it today, was built in 1938. The gravel road on the farm where visitors currently walk to The Fields at Rendleman Orchards was the original Highway 127.

The original road was a dirt road that was later graveled. People wanted the convenience of living along the highway. It is why you see the old houses along that gravel road at Rendleman Orchards.

There are original houses still standing on the farm and are nestled among the flowers for visitors to see when they come to the farm:

The original 1800s Rendleman family farmhouse, pictured below (right), has the original log cabin within it.



John and Isabelle Rendleman established their home in Alto Pass, a small log cabin in 1873. As the family grew, rooms were added as well as modern conveniences of indoor plumbing and electricity. The home still boasts beautiful woodwork, hardwood floors, high ceilings, and 1930s Anderson crank-out windows. Four generations of the Rendleman family have lived in the house and six generations have been raised on the farm passing through and making special memories in the farmhouse. Today, this historical old farmhouse still plays an important role in the family and business. The Rendleman home remains the heartbeat of the farm, still used daily and serving as a welcoming backdrop for customers to enjoy the magic of the working family farm. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Library

dates 1873.

way, was once a gas station or "oil house" in Alto Pass, which Grover bought and moved to the farm for additional migrant housing.

The big log house, pictured below (left), sits at the edge of the flower fields. Today, it is covered with protective siding. It was an old homestead already on the property when the land was purchased, and the farm was expanding. The back of the house that faces the flower fields has a large sign that reads, "These are the good ol' days."

flower fields are old tractors and trucks once used on the farm. These are now photo backdrops and props for visitors to capture their memories while visiting. Annually, hundreds of photos of happy visitors that enjoyed the farm are shared on social media.

from the flower fields and orchards. There are several still in use on the farm, but repurposed for today's needs on the farm. One can learn a lot about the past through these structures.

There was an outdoor kitchen off the back of the original farmhouse that was sometimes used for five months a year. It was used for canning, mainly in summer, to keep heat out of the house since there was no air conditioning. Ren helped with canning and fetching water. It was the kids' job to snap beans, and the women canned.

outdoor kitchen. It's a small building, walls lined with shelves and no light to store all the produce that was canned by the family after the harvest so there would be food

Not far from there is the pump house most rural homes had one. It sheltered a deep well that was the farm's water source.

Also, to the back of the original farmhouse is a 4-room building called the playhouse. Grover built it as a place for Ren and his siblings and cousins to go. When they were all together, it was a crowd of adults and sometimes four kids under seven years old, all underfoot at the same time in his home. Ren and Betty lived in it for a few months after getting married. Today, it is used for storage on the farm.

The original chicken house still stands and is used for storage. When Ren was a kid, he and his sisters would gather eggs for the family. During that time, they also

The small white house was once a migrant house. It is located near the entrance of the flower fields and surrounded by goats and chickens and dons a large American flag mural. This house pre-

The two-room house, just down the

Around the old buildings near the Only some farm buildings can be seen

The "can house" still sits next to the through the winter.

long-used tractors going by. equipment (their age, their condition)

the farm love the most. Theirs was an

raised 200 or more chickens for eggs and shoe the mules and use the shop.

Some buildings are no longer on the farm and have been replaced with new ones to serve today's farming needs. Ren recalls that there was once a large mule barn also home to the hogs, where the latest packing shed sits next to the Farm Market. In addition, there was a corn crib where the Farm Market now stands.

Buildings are never removed or torn down on the farm without considering the buildings' history and farming needs.

Unique and rich past shine light on the future



While the trees and farmland "sleep" during the winter, the farmers do not! Though the farm is closed to visitors during winter and spring months, there is still always equipment or buildings to be repaired or maintained, planning and purchasing for the next season, fieldwork, and even pruning to do. Photo credit: **Rendleman Family Libary**

One evening, early in the first U-pick their living working the same land their flower season on the farm, Michelle walked out to the sunflower field to return some scissors to the field entrance. On her way back to the farm market, she walked behind a couple returning to their car. They had been in the sunflower field earlier. Their two small children skipped along ahead of them.

Michelle noticed how sweet this little family was and overheard them talking. "Can you believe we get to just walk around on this farm like this," she heard one ask. Their conversion continued.

"I can't get over it! All these cool old buildings are still here and getting to see the apples come in from the orchards, I wonder if anyone lives in these houses. This place is really amazing," the couple went on to say. Enthused by their experience, the couple continued and commented about the old hydrant, the chipping white paint on the old buildings, and the

At that moment, it struck Michelle that the very thing she was trying to downplay and camouflage - the farm buildings and - were the things tourists and guests to multi-generation farm family who made them so much.

ancestors did.

At that moment, Michelle realized it was their history that made Rendleman Orchards different. Rendleman Orchards was doing more than growing peaches and apples; they were preserving an American way of life and connecting people to that.

This visiting couple was happy because they got to be a part of that connection for an afternoon and enjoyed that feeling. They enjoyed seeing equipment and old farmhouses showing their age from decades of use, maintained by people who love what they do.

This charm seen by the guest was an excellent reminder to her that she often loves to talk about: The beauty of a farm is in the day-to-day, but at Rendleman Orchards, it's also in the history of previous generations of family who have given back to leave a legacy.

It is evident that Rendleman Orchards, now in the 5th generation, has fully embraced and accepted who they are. While things might not be as shiny and new or easy to upgrade or maintain, the past on the farm is rich. Very rich. And their history tells an American story about agriculture, family, and an unwavering dedication to authentic, working farm and a long-time, the land and community that has given



The big log house sits at the edge of the flower fields with a large sign facing the field that reads, "These are the good ol' days." It is not uncommon for visitors to post photos on social media in the flower fields and in front of the sign and other farm photo props, sharing the experience they had visiting Rendleman Orchards. Photo credit: Unknown customer



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Continuing a legacy of service, addressing food insecurity

Bank program was conceived before the pandemic, the pandemic brought the program and its goals into focus. It also increased the urgency to address growing problems in the region due to climbing fuel prices and supply chain challenges.

The Feeding Illinois Farm to Food Bank partnership began with Rendleman Orchards serving as the pilot farm in the 2021 growing season. The concept, funded through the USDA's Farm to Food Bank grant, helped Feeding Illinois to pay Rendleman Orchards for picking and packing costs to harvest and package peaches, nectarines, and apples for the Feed Illinois network of food banks.

The produce Rendleman Orchards shipped to food banks was good quality but had some type of blemish and was not the highest premium grade typically sold to grocery stores and food distributors. Unfortunately, imperfect produce often goes to waste. Instead, the program allowed Rendleman Orchards to recoup their costs and provide fresh local nutritious fruit to Illinois neighbors in need.

Every week during the harvest, Wayne would contact a specific contact at each food bank with the quantity of available produce. Interested food banks would then place an order with Wayne by the end of the week and either pick it up or receive delivery the following Tuesday. Tri-State Food Bank and Northern Illinois Food Bank orders were delivered, while the St. Louis Area food bank did a pick-up directly from the farm.

By the end of the 2021 growing season,

Though Feeding Illinois' Farm to Food Feeding Illinois reimbursed Rendleman Orchards picking and packing costs for 620,425 pounds of Illinois-grown fresh peaches and nectarines, bagged and bulk apples. The program was successful for Feeding Illinois, the farm, and most importantly, the food bank families that now had access to fresh produce.

In 2022, Rendleman Orchards sold truckloads of apples, peaches, nectarines, zucchini squash, yellow squash, sweet corn, bell peppers, eggplant, and various melons to the Feeding Illinois Warehouses across Illinois - even more produce than the previous year. These warehouses distribute to the food pantries and food hubs within their district.

This time, Wayne was able to send a wider variety of produce because he partnered with other farmers in the Southern Illinois region - Flamm Orchards, Eckert Orchards, Keller Farms, and Stuckmeyer Farms - to procure food (in addition to Rendleman Orchards' produce) for those in need served by food banks in St. Louis, Evansville, Ind., Chicago and several locations throughout Illinois. In addition to his other responsibilities during the harvest season, Wayne put loads of produce together, set up the trucking support, and shipped 1.3 million pounds of fresh produce to the Feeding Illinois Warehouses across the state.

Wayne says it's truly the most rewarding project in his career. It continues to motivate him going into the next growing season - to help bring more local produce to the food insecure and to help people and their communities.



The core purpose of the Farm to Food Bank Program is to connect food banks with farms to purchase products like fresh fruits and vegetables, cheese, milk, meat, and eggs directly from farmers. Rendleman Orchards was recognized in February 2022 at the Illinois Specialty Growers Conference as the Friend of the Food Banks' Farmer of the Year 2022 by Feeding Illinois for their contributions to the pilot program towards creating a permanent Farm to Food Bank program in the State of Illinois. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary





Wayne and Michelle Sirles of Rendleman Orchards during the first season of the Feeding Illinois Farm to Food Bank program, loading a semi of produce at the orchard headed to the St Louis Food Bank, which also serves Metro East Illinois. Photo credit: Rendleman Family Libary

