

The History of the 'Mortgage Lifter' Tomato, and the History of the Name

Introduction

There are the seeds, and there are the stories about the seeds. Planting seeds is an expression of hope and faith in the future, and the stories are an act of remembrance that honors the caretakers of the seed. When we connect them together, it makes the world a richer place.

In 1982 I started my heirloom seed business, Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. We were privileged to receive many heirloom varieties, seeds that came with amazing stories.

One of the most famous offerings from our seed catalog, is a tomato called 'Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter'. It has a particularly fascinating story. Small parts of the history of this tomato have been previously published in abbreviated form in several seed catalogs and online. This article adds a lot of additional information that has never been published so that the full history of this tomato will be preserved along with the seeds.

In 1987, we were the first to offer the true 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato, named for "Radiator Charlie", the nickname of M. C. Byles (Marshall Cletis Byles), who developed the tomato. At that time, although there were no tomatoes named 'Mortgage Lifter' commercially available in the seed trade, in the 1985 Seed Savers Exchange Annual Membership Directory there were several types of tomatoes named 'Mortgage Lifter' offered to other members, each with different histories.

Thanks to a serendipitous meeting, I began gathering the story of the true 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato. Over time, I found out that there were two different people who had two different tomato varieties with different genetic histories though both used the name 'Mortgage Lifter'.

In the Fall of 1985, I walked into the computer store, Cavalier Computers, at the University of Virginia. There I met an employee, Dawn Martin, who asked me, "What do you want to use a computer for?" I said that I had started an heirloom seed company and needed a computer to keep a mailing list, to develop a customer database, and to compose a seed catalog. In the conversation, I mentioned that I had an heirloom tomato, called 'Mortgage Lifter'. Dawn immediately brightened, and excitedly said, "You need to talk to my husband, Ed. His grandfather developed that tomato!" I was a floored by this revelation. We animatedly talked about this and Dawn contacted her husband to arrange a meeting with me.

I arranged a phone interview with Ed Martin in which Ed recounted many fascinating aspects of his grandfather's life. After that interview, Ed agreed to visit his grandfather, M. C. Byles (aka "Radiator Charlie"), to obtain a tape interview between himself and his grandfather. Later, Ed met me and he talked about his grandfather, and gave me a copy of the audio recording. This recording is the only fully documented story of 'Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter' tomato.

Introduction to the interview of Jeff McCormack with Ed Martin

This first of two interviews about the 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato was conducted in November 1985. In this interview there are some inaccuracies in Ed Martin's recollection due to misremembrances and lack of direct knowledge, a common problem in oral histories. Ed Martin remembers his own 'Mortgage Lifter' plants as hybrid, that his 'Mortgage Lifter' tomatoes repeatedly lose their character after about three growing seasons. However, the reason his plants don't come true to type is not because the tomato is a hybrid. Rather, it is because the blossoms are so open that they easily cross-pollinate with other tomato

varieties. As tomato breeder, Dr. Randolph Gardner remarks: "Many of the heirlooms that have the fasciated gene don't have an anther cone that is completely closed, so the flower stigma is exposed and subject to pollen transfer by bumblebees so there is a lot of outcrossing and contamination to the genetics of the varieties when people save seeds."

Audio transcript of interview of Jeff McCormack with Ed Martin

Jeff McCormack [JM]: [Begin audio recording.] Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Can you tell me about your memories of how the 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato was developed?

Ed Martin [EM]: It was a hand pollination gambit. In fact, a lot of it was simply done very crudely, just by taking a stock tomato and putting it in the center of others and doing this repeatedly. I think 'German Johnson' was the original tomato in the center. One was of yellow-wild [sic] type. It was a very crude type thing.

[JM]: So, it sounds like he might have just taken the blossom of one and touched it to another?

EM: Yeah, but I'm not even sure it was that scientific at some points.

JM: They [the wild ones] are primarily insect pollinated, when insects can pollinate them. What I have are two tomatoes. I was given ones called 'Pink Mortgage Lifter' and another which is a yellow, and I'm not sure that the yellow one was one developed by your grandfather. I don't know if he developed both.

EM: Where did you get them?

JM: I got them from southwest Virginia.

EM: You know, the thing has been around long enough that good golly, there is no telling what it is. There are some of ... There is a way to get some of the original seeds, and that's in West Virginia and I don't know exactly where. It's the type thing, you know, it's the type thing we talked about when I was younger, and I'd say, "Hey, that's neat." and you'd sort of let it slide. I had real 'Mortgage Lifter' seeds two years ago, and you could only use them a couple of years obviously because it is a hybrid.

JM: The 'Mortgage Lifter' is a hybrid?

EM: Oh sure.

JM: Oh, so he would do this pollination every year?

EM: Or to use their terminology, you'd get it where you want it, and then choose your tomatoes, and get enough seeds to last you for 10 years or so. But he was not been involved with that. He hasn't been involved with that for 20 years. It is my understanding that he sold, traded something, somehow the rights locally, somewhere over in West Virginia, and those people took it and made a bigger business out of it. I have seen 'Mortgage Lifter' seeds on the market, and about eight or nine years ago and raised them and they did not have the properties of 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato that I have known for 20 years. So, you know you are getting into the type thing, that I'm not sure that anybody was doing anything but reading something and some people working more or less out of curiosity.

You have got to know my grandfather. He was everything from a dough-boy to an overland mail pilot back in those days, in an open cockpit plane with a 200-pound sack of mail, a professional wrestler. He was a millionaire and he lost every bit of it.

JM: He was a millionaire and he lost it?

EM: Oh yeah, every bit of it. You know, just a real black sheep type. He is very, very feeble now. He is around 90 years old. He is just a real character, an absolute character.

JM: Do you have any idea when he actually got involved in developing the 'Mortgage Lifter'? Was it when he was say, in his 20's or 30's?

EM: Off the top of my head, this is a guess. I could be off by as much as 10 years. I would say it was right after World War II, which he was not involved in. My impression is that it was sometime in the 40's. That might put some time perspective on it.

JM: It would be really interesting, the story of his life. As I mentioned to the editor up there, he was a professional wrestler, an amateur plant breeder. They thought it was just a fascinating story.

EM: I don't think he spent more than a ... I don't think it was anything more than a passing fancy to tell you the truth. Oh, he made some pin money in his later years because he ... I know this happened about 10 years ago, he, when he still was very vigorous, he went sell about 1,000 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato plants. In his later years he didn't care anything about, you know, anything except having his creature comforts. He is your typical old man now, is married, and lives in a little house and has no money, but is a real real guy, you know.

About 10 years ago ... Okay, I am jumping the gun. He would sell about a 1,000 plants a year. Once every five or six years he would slip over to West Virginia and get some more seeds. You know he had some kind of arrangement with somebody that he was allowed to do this. It was part of some deal, cut way back when. And he would grow the plants and sell them for a dollar a piece. Do you know the price of tomato plants? That is exorbitant, and had people waiting in line. In fact, during the winter you had to get on his list: "And please may I have five?" And "Let's see, you got three last year. I'm pretty sure I can give you five this year." He would sign them up and take his 1,000 dollars and do something really big, like get a new rototiller for his garden, or something like that, or whatever he cared about.

But a seed store, a large seed store, had a weekly radio show, and one Saturday he heard them advertising 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato plants. And he called them asked them how they got 'Mortgage Lifter' plants. They said, "Oh, we got ways." He said, well you don't have 'Mortgage Lifter'. They said, "Yes we do too." He said, "Well, I am going to ask you as a good Christian gentleman ..." And all this kind of stuff. He is very much into to his Bible now too. [He said], "Okay. ... just sort of stop that." They said, "No, there is nothing you can do about it." So he said, "We'll find out about that." About 20 minutes later they got a call from an attorney in Washington, DC. [laughter] So exactly what transpired in that ensuing 20 minutes, I'm not sure. I expect he called somebody over in West Virginia and let him know. The old guy is serious about his stuff.

JM: Where does that put me, I wonder? [laughter]

EM: Oh, nowhere.

JM: I feel a little awkward now, because I have been hearing about these 'Mortgage Lifter' tomatoes here locally. Snow's Nursery used to sell ...

EM: I think the thing has gone virtually generic. He told me once about planting a 'German Johnson' over a period of several years, making his own wine. He told me once about taking the 'German Johnson' as the original plant and what could be done with it. He had a very large yellow [sic] ... and he had reasons for all of it. Some were correct and some I knew were not. But, he wanted the yellow [sic] to reduce the acidity because he didn't like tomatoes that burned his mouth. There was another tomato that he mentioned that was large but very, very poor quality. He talked about putting 'German Johnson' in the center, and I think he said "bend them over and pollinate them", but I really wasn't listening that carefully at that time. He said as soon as you do that you have to kill all of the plants. Well, I thought that sounded a little bit strange, but I can see the reason behind it now ... just dig them up, let it grow,

let it mature, and see what you get, and then replant it, even if you do it in a hothouse. And then continue with this one stock plant: only take the seeds out of the stock plant to plant it in the middle. I am using his terminology now, and "bend them over", and I guess pollinate them again, and just keep doing that, and just keep going. That's pretty much the way I understand it came about. So I think it is pretty much generic now, to tell you the truth.

JM: Let me see if I understand this correctly. You have say, three different kinds of plants, the 'German Johnson' in the middle, a large-fruited yellow...

EM: I can't speak about this technically, but we're sort of recounting stories now, so "Stick one in the middle and bend them over is fine with me". [laughter]

JM: Yeah, it sounds like he must have been ...

EM: He told me there were more plants involved than that. Which three? I know about the 'German Johnson', the 'Ponderosa' yellow [sic], does that sound right?

JM: That sounds right.

EM: And he told me at one time there were five, not three.

JM: Five tomatoes?

EM: Involved in giving it the meatiness. I think a 'Beefsteak' which has been around for years and years.

JM: Yes.

EM: Have you ever seen the plant?

JM: Well, I have grown, I grew, what I thought to be the 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato this year, and the fruits were huge. They were typically up over 2 pounds.

EM: Sounds like you have them then.

JM: Two and quarter pounds.

EM: Low acid, very small cores, very few seeds?

JM: Few seeds, low acid, the cores I wouldn't call small. Sometimes the fruits would be irregular shape, but they were huge. I mean they would pull over the plant practically.

EM: How about the leaves? Did you notice the leaf margins?

JM: I didn't pay much attention to the leaf margins. They didn't strike me ... actually the plants still have foliage because the frost hasn't hit them.

EM: The leaf margins of the 'Mortgage Lifter' that I have been growing the last 15 years or so, well I'll tell you exactly how long it has been. By god, I've been growing the things for the last 20 years.

JM: Then, it may not be a hybrid.

EM: Yeah, it is a hybrid [sic] because you cannot use the seeds over and over. You can use them two to three seasons at the most, and they start losing their character, but the leaf margins are not as serrate as most of the tomatoes.

EM: They [the leaf margins] are not as indented as the plants we normally see. In fact, about 20 years ago, I bought some 'Trip-L-Crop' and that is definitely a hybrid [sic], but that has been around for 20 years. And the first thing I notice about it were the leaf margins were almost entire, and they resembled the 'Mortgage Lifter' leaves more than anything I've seen at that point, so there is some fairly direct degree of relatedness between the two, although the Trip-L-Crop does not have the low acidity, and the meatiness of the 'Mortgage Lifter'.

JM: Well, if he is using the same seed for say three years ... let's see ... he's not saving the seed of each of those crops is he?

EM: No, you can save the seed for about three years.

JM: Of the original seed?

EM: And then you start getting your normal genetic ... you get some small ones ... you know it goes back to its parent.

JM: I guess what I was trying to get at was, whether he was saving the same lot of seed and drawing a little bit from the lot each year or whether he was ...

EM: He has done both.

JM: You can stabilize a variety in six to eight years.

EM: It probably would depend on its genetic makeup wouldn't it?

JM: Yeah. Most plant breeders when they create a new variety, they'll make a hybrid first and plant that out. Of course, that first generation is always the same, very uniform. And then the second and third it begins to sort out. But, if you save any seed from that second or third generation ...

EM: And backcross it?

JM: Not backcross it, but ... no he would start all over again. He'd plant it one year and then save the seed from that crop to grow a second crop, save the seed and start a third, and then he would start over again because they were starting to sort out.

EM: And then discard them and start all over again. I have personally never had any seed in 20 years that didn't begin to sort out. In fact, personally I don't know how to stabilize a seed like that.

JM: Well, you can stabilize it if you save the seed from one plant, not a population of plants, you just keep selfing the same plant all the time. You can make it very stable. And of course the longer you do it, the more stable it is. Most plant breeders consider that by six to eight generations you've got a fairly stable plant.

EM: This thing has been around long enough that with any selection it would begin to stabilize itself. There is a great mystique about the tomato he saves the seed from. He will tell you that there are male and female fruits. If you know anything about that as a biologist tell me, because I don't. I tell him, "Granddad, there is no way, come on!" "Son, he says, "I don't care how much learnin' you got, there is

male and female plants and this one is the one you take the seed out of and this is the one you don't." [laughter] He goes by the indentations on the bottom of the fruit. There has got to be something to it. But I have saved seeds myself and have had poor results, and the seeds that he saved, he would just laugh and say, "See, I told you!" So he must be, without knowing why he must be picking some trait that allows the seed to be more stable.

JM: Well there is something to that ...

EM: Oh my goodness.

JM: When you are doing plant breeding, which I have done a little myself, you always keep track of which is the male parent and which is the female parent because most of the genetic material is in the nucleus, but there is some small amount in the surrounding cell material.

EM: There are plasmids?

JM: Yes, chloroplasts. Some genetics of plants are due to the chloroplast genetics.

EM: I knew there was DNA in there, but I didn't know that it had anything to do with anything but the chloroplasts.

JM: Well, it does turn out that the chloroplast affects certain things. I don't know that I know enough about it to explain it, but it certainly affects the photosynthetic capabilities of the plants, and possibly some other things. I think it controls male sterility in plants. I may be wrong about this. But in any case ...

EM: That's possible, because he told me they wouldn't bear. I did get mixed results from the seeds I saved and he got pretty uniform results. Keep in mind that he is doing this purely on a folklore basis.

JM: Well you know a lot of these ...

EM: I'm not putting that down, don't get me wrong.

JM: No, I have the utmost respect for a lot of people with stuff. They could teach people in the universities a few things, you know, if they were willing to listen sometimes. They may not have the formal education, but just by observation a lot of these people know quite a bit.

EM: You know, besides being my grandfather, the old guy always amazed me with his curiosity, I guess is the word. He had no formal education at all. He was taught his math, reading, etc. And before he became older, before his health started failing he was a prodigious reader. I don't mean that he read Shakespeare and Tolstoy, etc., but he read everything that came in front of him. He was always thinking and fiddling and stuff like that. And he was a curious person, in that he never saw anything that he didn't try to figure out the why. Even if he to just look at it and make up a reason why, and go from there. In that way, he always delighted me particularly when I got old enough to appreciate it. I remember when we were sitting in a boat and fishing one day. I was at W&L. I was expounding on some newfound politics, this, that, and the other. He had been sitting in the boat for about two hours and he hadn't said a word and was fishing along. And he very calmly looked at me and said: "Son, that's just one man's opinion." So, nothing went over his head.

The best I can do. Let me see if I can give him a call tomorrow evening, and send word by Dawn to you, okay? Let me see what I can do in 24 hours, and I hate wasting your nickel like this.

JM: Oh, no, it is not wasting it at all. This has been fascinating to me.

EM: Well, I would like to be a little more objective, etc. Oh heck, I started planting 'Mortgage Lifter' in 1967. I didn't pay a lot of attention to it then, and listened to his tales, and this, that, and the other. I knew some other people had been planting his 'Mortgage Lifter', five years before that, and he'd been planting them a great deal of time before that. And, it was just a little piece of interest, and that was about it. I guess most things like that are, aren't they?

JM: Yeah, but what I'm trying to do is document, oh, what I call the links between culture and agriculture. There are a lot of people like him that are responsible for introducing new plants.

EM: I hope you don't want any paperwork or anything because there is none on that.

JM: I guess what I am most curious about is what were the parent plants, and what was the mechanical process in terms of, you know, getting them to hybridize? It sounds like the way he was doing it, he may not have the same hybrid each time he did it, unless he did it in a very systematic and careful way, and maybe he did.

EM: The one time I sat and listened to his entire explanation, he told me it took a certain number of years. I want to say seven, but you know we are riddled with sevens, and thirteen's, and threes, and fives. I believe he had a hothouse at that time and he could force his plants and go through more than one year's generation in a year's time. I know he said there were five plants involved, not three. I think he told me he put them in tubs when you couldn't get them out in your spot that you had cleared. I know that sounds really wild. I know that he knew enough to do whatever he was doing away from other things. He probably got that from *Farmer's Journal*, to tell you the truth. So, I will give him a call and find out parentage, and the mechanism, the mechanical aspect.

JM: That would be great. It would be a fascinating piece of agricultural history. There is a lot of interest in the old varieties, and to find the story like this, I come across maybe one a year, and it is just incredible.

EM: I think the thing is generic now, though I really do. I have seen it in so many places at this point; that I think it is something that Northrup Seeds ...

JM: I know it is not carried by anybody because I've got an inventory of all the seeds in the U.S., every company in the U.S. and Canada, every variety.

EM: I saw it in a catalog one time. I can't remember where or when. It was several years ago. Not a major catalog. Just a little blip. So I have seen it in publication, and I have seen it at roadside stands from Pennsylvania particularly through West Virginia, down into Virginia.

JM: Well I have had four or five people send me seeds of it.

EM: Have they all come up the same type of tomato?

JM: I haven't grown them all, but the descriptions have all matched. One person has offered to send me seeds of 'German Johnson', and then there is a 'German Pink' tomato.

EM: 'German Johnson' used to be a pretty standard brand though.

JM: Yeah, it's an old variety.

EM: I think you can still get it. There is a company that specializes in the old varieties. I can't tell you the name of it either. It is the type of thing that delights my fancy every three or four years, and I get all the catalogs. Something comes up the next year, and I don't have time to really follow through with it. 'German Johnson' has been around for quite a while. 'German Johnson' was ... are you from a gardening background?

JM: Not really, I guess my background is academic. I'm a biologist, but I have left academics and gone to working in the field, more or less, and started the seed company. Your wife was telling me ...

EM: I'm into recombinant DNA, and I'm going to look into chloroplasts ... you've given me some food for thought ... in chloroplasts. Sounds like there is a Ph.D. is in there somewhere.

JM: Yeah, unfortunately, there was one person here to talk to about that has gone to Cornell. I don't know if ... well there is no one in the Biology Department here who is familiar with extranuclear inheritance in plants that works in that area.

EM: If I thought I could get into a program, I would get into plant plasmids.

JM: Actually there was a terrific person here for that because she was ...

EM: I think I'll probably go, or do my best to go into the Department of Anatomy. That doesn't sound like the right department. It sounds like I lost my way, but they are quite into cell biology there, and I think they want some people who are interested in DNA work, and I think I could do some good work there. That's what I think I'll be doing. There is just so much ... I think if I had it to do all over again I think I would go strictly into plant research, I really would.

JM: Yeah, that's really my area too. I guess I want to do it on my own terms, although I find myself ...

EM: Are you into molecular?

JM: Well, my degree is pollination ecology and natural products chemistry, and almost all my coursework was in organic chemistry and biochemistry. I had very little formal plant work, but my research was in that area. And then I taught for two years at Middlebury College, all plant courses., and got fed up with the tenure business. My contract was renewed there ...

EM: Do you have your doctorate?

JM: Yes, but my wife was working in a shoe store in Vermont and coming home in tears because there just wasn't anything in Middlebury, and I just wasn't happy with academics, so we just picked a spot on the map and moved without jobs, and came here. I taught at Sweet Briar for a year, and taught at U.Va., and now I manage the greenhouse in the Biology Department which is where I do some research.

EM: Hey, that's fantastic. I really had no idea who you were to tell you the truth. Dawn had mentioned your name to me, but I really didn't know your background or anything else.

JM: Yeah. She said you ... it has been a while since I talked with her, she said you were interested in pollination, is that right, or working in a bog, I don't remember.

EM: I did some work on *Orontium aquaticum*. If I saw a program I would head in that direction, but they are not around. You more or less have to pick and choose, you know. You can't always say this is what I am going to do. There are time and space restrictions that. You do what you have to do. Yeah, I enjoy plants. I enjoy field work to tell you the truth, but I don't think there is much potential right now

in field work. But you'll never get that out of my blood. No, I have been a hiker, a stomper, sort of like Granddad. I plant plants and see what happens all my life, but probably I am a little more directed than his approach, though, I hope.

JM: Maybe the era of Field Biology will again, things go in cycles, maybe not in the same way. Part of the reason I got out is because my first love is Field Biology with chemistry involved.

EM: Funny, that is where my instinct takes me, and there is so little known in that realm. For example, I wanted to do a little paper on *Orontium aquaticum* so I looked over U.Va. and spent a day finding out what I need to know and go back. Well, I spent two weeks, and found out that nobody had really done anything on *Orontium aquaticum* since Engler, nothing that I was looking for anyway. I don't know if this is true, a lot of people, it seems, have taken his papers and paraphrased them, and put them back into their book of botany, or field book, or this or the other. I didn't see where a lot of work had been done. It just dawned on me, that if there were more opportunity for academic studies, at the biochemical level, or even the descriptive to tell you the truth. You know, I have never [seen] a source that gave a complete life cycle of *Orontium aquaticum*?

JM: Well, I can believe that. There is a lot of basic stuff that has never been looked at.

EM: Yeah, and I was simply amazed, and you can't say that about most of the animal kingdom, and I was amazed at what short shrift had been paid to the plant kingdom in the past, particularly in the past 25 years.

JM: Yeah, it never fails to amaze me, that that is the situation, because that is where all our food comes from. And there is not even a lot known about our basic crop biology, even about how a lot of our food plants are pollinated. Strangely enough I got involved in that.

EM: I'm beginning to see a thread to your interest here. It is almost as if botany no longer is a science, or is not considered a true science or something like that, and so, people who have found a funny looking grape in the woods and decided to grow it, or found out that there was a funny tomato that tasted good, more or less just passed it on, and it was considered almost folklore wasn't it?

JM: Yeah.

EM: I see somewhat of a thread to what you are saying. Well look, don't let me take up all of your phone now. I feel guilty with long distance calls. I just paid a phone bill today myself.

JM: Well, I decided I'd be willing to spend money on this, because I was interested in tracking this down, and if I'm selling a tomato that may not be the original thing.

EM: Are you selling the 'Mortgage Lifter' now?

JM: It's going to be in ... I have two 'Mortgage Lifter's, the one which I believe to be the original pink-red 'Mortgage Lifter', that's going to be in the catalog next year, and I have a yellow one, which I really think is a 'Yellow Ponderosa'.

EM: Possibly with a little something else thrown in.

JM: Possibly, because it is actually gold colored, not yellow.

EM: Okay, you're familiar with the 'Golden Jubilee' and the 'Sunray'?

JM: I think those are new varieties, aren't they?

EM: Oh God, no, they have been around 25 years that I know of. It is sort of like reinventing the wheel. Recently, I have noticed in, not this year, but two years ago, I went on a binge of getting all the catalogs again. I noticed some of these old varieties popping up again, but I know that the 'Sunray', for example, I raised that back in the 60's. Take a look at 'Trip-L-Crop' too. Have you heard of that?.

JM: Oh yeah.

EM: Grow 'Trip-L-Crop' and see what you think of that in comparison with the 'Mortgage Lifter'. I don't think the tomato is the same quality, but there are some interesting similarities, that I think will be interesting to you as a biologist. This is supposedly the tree tomato that can grow up to 25 feet.

JM: I have seeds of that.

EM: Grow that and see what you think. In the meantime I will call Granddad tomorrow just as soon as I get home, and get him to recount the episode to me and I will get that information to you. Give me about 72 hours. Tell you what I will do too, give me a little more time and will get you 100 seeds of what I believe to be the original 'Mortgage Lifter', as close to the source as you can get.

JM: That would be great, that would be wonderful.

EM: I'll be happy to do that, just for interest.

JM: So this yellow one may not be ...

EM: I don't think it is. I think that would be something that somebody was playing with. See, that's what I mean, I think the thing has become generic. I think you probably had several hundred people into it over the years. I think any breeder today could come up with the traits in the 'Mortgage Lifter' today. Certainly you could, very very easily.

JM: Yeah.

EM: It is just a matter of what looks good, and what can we do with it. It was not scientific at all, so to speak, oh what is the word I'm looking for ... a logical sequence of events ... the way we did with plasmids, remember?

JM: Well, even if he was selecting on the basis of large and small blossom end scars on there, he may have been inadvertently been selecting for some feature, even though his basis for selection may have been incorrect. I mean calling it male and female, but he is obviously selecting for something there.

EM: That's right, and getting it the way you want it. I do know this, the 'Mortgage Lifter', when they are the original are very very high quality tomato. In fact, I'll see if I can get a photograph for you also of three tomatoes.

JM: Oh wonderful.

EM: I ought to send you my catalog so you can see what you've got in there. Where is your greenhouse actually?

JM: It's behind Gilmer Hall.

EM: So you are actually on campus. Are you teaching now?

JM: No, not any longer, and I'm on reduced time, less than 40 hours, so I'm not always there. So if you stop by it is best to call ahead.

EM: You are doing a little commercial thing on your own?

JM: Yeah, it is taking longer, but it isn't big enough to do full time yet.

EM: You should have an abundance of old varieties to look at.

JM: Yeah, I've got so many tomatoes now, a lot of them are in storage with no hope of growing them out right away, anytime soon, so, but I've set up a grower program. I have 15 growers in different states.

EM: Let me tell you one quick story about Grandfather. To show you the kind of tinker he was, he was in West Virginia. He was always looking for ways in those days to make a buck. And there were radiator shops all over the place. He had learned radiator repair someplace: I don't know where, and he was in Logan, West Virginia which in those days was like a gold rush town, the heavy machinery, the coal, but there were very few skilled people around, and he noticed that they were sending their trucks into Ohio, by rail, I believe to have the radiators repaired on the large trucks. He said "Aha!" You know, the rascal set up a radiator repair shop at the foot of the mountain where lots of trucks broke down. I am talking about the big [inaudible] and things like that, [he] set up a radiator repair shop, didn't do it like the normal yokel, you know, with the filling station. He actually took a warehouse and would pull the trucks to the front of it, and he had an assembly, and the men would take the radiator out and would put it on a hoist, and would actually go on chains through the building to each station, and when it came out the other side it was ready to pull the truck to the other side and stick it in.

JM: So, that's how he became a millionaire?

EM: Well, he made a lot of money in that. I don't know what else he did. He did several other things. The mudslide took his business out at one time, a car came through his bedroom, and don't get into all that kind of stuff. That's just West Virginia life back in those days. It was rough and tumble. Not that he was a rough and tumble character, he wasn't. He was always pretty much of a good guy type. That was just the nature of those areas, but he had that spark of ingenuity, and [he said] "If you are going to do it, let's do it this way. It will be much easier and you get a better quality product." I asked him, "What did you charge for that?" He'd name some figure and I said, "Well that's not that much." We got to consider that most people would do a car radiator for five bucks back then. He was raking in some pretty good money. There was one mudslide when half a mountain came down and wiped out one business he had. He hated banks. He kept everything, including his payroll in the safe. Never excavated [the damage] or even tried. He said the Lord was sending him a message, that kind of thing. You know, you really get crossed up into his own little brand of logic, but it was interesting. Owned his own airplanes, couldn't find one powerful enough that he could afford in the United States, so he slipped over into Canada and bought a military trainer, a fairly high-powered military trainer too. The U.S. government gave him some flack for importing a military plane. He said, more or less the heck with it and kept on flying it. So if you don't think things are documentary with Granddad, you can see why, he was more or less a free spirit. Of course Mother was married before World War II, and she and Dad, were the calm, stable type, and she would say, "Well, I don't know what your Granddad is doing right now." that kind of thing.

JM: Well, he needed an anchor, I guess.

EM: Some years later, he came driving into Danville where Mom was, and he had [inaudible] suitcases in his car, and he came to see Mom. She said, "What in the world are you doing here?" And he said, "The Lord told me to come back where I belonged." and they went and bought him a little house and that's where he is right now. She said, "But how about ..." And he said, "I don't care about any of that stuff. I just want to live out the rest of my days and have me a little garden, that's all."

Interesting character, I think, and if it does you any good in your article ... some of the folklore, that's fine too.

JM: I really appreciate your taking the time to talk.

EM: My pleasure. You caught me a little off guard. Had I known, I would have prepared. I knew Dawn said you wanted something, but I just hadn't gotten around to sitting down with him for any length of time.

JM: I had planned in getting in touch with you later, but I was surprised to get this call, so I thought maybe I'd better find out a little bit more about this anyhow ...

Audio transcript of interview of Ed Martin with his grandfather M. C. Byles ("Radiator Charlie")

The audio of this interview is peppered with background noise (loud cars, trains, and music from an ice cream truck making its rounds down the street). Thus, there are portions of the transcript noted as inaudible. But the story is a gem. It is about unorthodoxy, inventiveness, love of discovery, and most of all, love for home-grown tomatoes. M. C. Byles is 85 years old at the time, and his mind tends to wander into life reflections. Ed Martin tries to keep the interview on track, returning again and again to the origin story of his 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato, but his grandfather's reflections unfold like the petals of a lotus, revealing a truly remarkable life. M.C. Byles died at the age of 97, but his home-grown tomatoes and his legacy live on.

A very small section of this story first appeared on National Public Radio's *Living on Earth* program on September 23, 2005. In the process of preparing the audio for that show, NPR first remastered the original audio in order to filter out some of the background noise. The resulting audio recording was significantly improved. Though it was not possible to filter out all the noise to recover the complete narrative, I am grateful for the efforts of NPR reporter, Jeff Young, in helping to preserve the interview that appears below.

Ed Martin [EM]: November 10, 1985, 4:30 in the afternoon. I am sitting at 860 Lee Street talking to my grandfather, M.C. Byles, and he'd get mad if anybody said it is Marshall Cletis Byles.

Radiator Charlie (M.C. Byles) [RC]: [laughter]

EM: Let me ask you a question first. You know that 'Mortgage Lifter' that I have been growing for twenty years?

RC: That's right.

EM: The one I got the seed from you?

RC: That's a tomato.

EM: Did you tell me that you were developing that thing up in West Virginia?

RC: It took me seven years to develop it. I took 10 plants and put them in a circle and put one in the center, and I had a little suction gun, that I took the pollen off the outside ones and put it on the one in the center, the one that was blooming.

EM: Was it something like an ear syringe?

RC: Yes, and I did that for seven years. I kept the seeds of the center one, and kept doing that until I developed that 'Mortgage Lifter'. I didn't originally call it that. I really don't [inaudible].

EM: That was in West Virginia. What town was that in?

RC: That was Logan, West Virginia. I sold enough of the plants at a dollar a piece, after six years until I ... after six years I sold them for a dollar a piece, that after six years, I paid off my place selling those tomato plants. I would sell approximately \$600 every three months in the spring of the year.

EM: That was a lot of money in those days.

RC: I didn't pay but \$6,000 for my home, and paid most of it off with tomato plants.

EM: What was the first year you developed that plant?

RC: Oh, I believe it was somewhere in the 40's. I can't remember just what year it was, but it was the 40's.

EM: Early 40's or late 40's?

RC: No, the early 40's, and uh ...

EM: Remember that time when you were up there in Logan, in the radiator business or something?

RC: I had [my] first automobile radiator repair shop in Logan, West Virginia. I had been in West Virginia only a year or two. There by Charleston and Huntington which was about about 67 miles from Logan, and I still have that right now ... [inaudible]. Today I have four plants out there, still getting ripe out there. I'm still getting ripe tomatoes at this time of year.

EM: November the 10th.

RC: Yes, November the 10th.

EM: That's a heck of a tomato. Look, didn't you tell me that there were five tomatoes that made that thing?

RC: No, there were 10 different plants.

EM: No, I mean different kinds of tomatoes.

RC: Four of them were the largest in the country.

EM: What were the four?

RC: Well I can't remember it was 'German'...

EM: 'German Johnson'?

RC: Yes, and 'Beefsteak', and uh ...

EM: And a 'Yellow Ponderosa' was one of them right?

RC: I had a 'Yellow Ponderosa' then, but I didn't mix them. [train whistle in the background]
I had an English tomato seed too.

EM: What a minute, wait a minute, we got a train whistle. [long pause while train passes by]
Wait a minute.

RC: That train goes by here about every ten minutes.

RC: Okay, we're talking about 'German Johnson'...

EM: 'Beefsteak', and some seeds that came from Germany, and some from England.

EM: Where did you get them?

RC: I don't remember just where all I did find all those seeds. I had to go several different places to get them.

EM: What were those tomatoes like, do you remember? I mean the English seeds for example?

RC: They were the largest in the country. I took four different types of seeds, the largest in the country that were known at that time. [motorcycle rumbles by in background] I developed that and paid off the mortgage on my house.

EM: What gave it the low acid that you were looking for?

RC: Well, I don't know. The thing about it was that there weren't very many seeds in those tomatoes. They're most all fruit inside. I have some out there right now. I should bring in the house so the frost don't get them soon ... [inaudible]

EM: I was thinking at one time you told me you used a yellow tomato in there [because] it gave the low acid on the thing.

RC: No, I never used a yellow tomato. I have raised yellow tomatoes up to three pounds. I've got [inaudible] 60 of them in there and have four of them laying on the scale and they weigh 10 pounds.

EM: Almost 11 ... 10 ³/₄ pounds

RC: So I still save the seeds of it, the female.

EM: Now you keep telling me about a male tomato and a female tomato. What are you talking about?

RC: Well, a male tomato has just a little dot on the end of it, and a female has a little cross piece, that is where it gets its name, female, and that is the one you take the seeds out of it.

EM: Its got a little bridge on it.

RC: It's got a little place right across it, and so that's the female, and that's the one you save seed of. I have saved plants for years and years. I had a plant bed about a 12×10, about three feet in the ground, and had benches in there, and had it covered with plastic. That's how I raised them, but I just raise enough now for myself. I don't sell anymore. I was born March 4, 1900, and if I live to March 4th of next year I'll be 86 years old, and so I don't have much time to get out there. [laughs nervously] [inaudible]

EM: Haven't you been a dough-boy, a wrestler? You built a radiator factory. I saw your factory in West Virginia. That was something. I was just a small kid. You flew the mail, owned your own plane, what else?

RC: I owned two different airplanes. One of them was 65 horsepower, and I used to ... [inaudible]

EM: I know, I flew in that. You crashed that one though.

RC: No, I ... [inaudible] I bought a 175 horse job [inaudible]. I went too fast with it and tore up the canopy on it. [inaudible] It cruised 120 miles per hour and flew several thousand feet high at three miles a minute. I mean speed, it didn't register on the speedometer. [inaudible] flew few miles faster. I usually fly at 8,000 feet [inaudible] at 140 miles per hour most of the time. [inaudible]

EM: Now these tomatoes, when you had them planted in a circle around a center plant, right?

RC: Yea.

EM: And you took this little ear syringe and you put the pollen on the flowers of the third plant, right?

RC: That's right.

EM: And you only saved the seeds off the center plant?

RC: The center.

EM: What gave you the idea to mix them like that?

RC: Well, I just figured that if I put the pollen from the plants around that. [inaudible] every year. I did that for several years, and so that is the way I developed it. You can go out there and look at what I've got now, at this time of year.

EM: The beauty of that tomato is that it is so meaty and low acid. I don't know where the low acid came from

RC: I don't know myself. I couldn't tell you why. It was the different kinds of seed that I put out.

EM: You don't know what the other seeds were?

RC: All I know, remember, is that one was a German, one was Italian, and one was an English seed.

EM: So you got the 'German Johnson', the 'Beefsteak'. Surely you didn't use a 'Roma'. They are high in acid.

RC: I never could find that tomato. I heard of it.

EM: It's not a big one anyway.

RC: It is supposed to be best for this climate too, better than any other tomato, but I never have been able to find the seed.

EM: I've got the seed but I don't like the tomato though.

RC: You don't? This tomato don't have a piece of stem on it which is one thing I like about it. It's all meaty.

EM: What was the center plant, do you remember?

RC: It was the same thing. I don't remember which variety it was.

EM: You took the stock plant and you kept saving the seeds from that one plant?

RC: That's right.

EM: Then you mixed them. I take it you had a variety around it.

RC: Yeah, I had three different tomatoes, the biggest in the country that I could find at that time.

EM: 'Beefsteak', 'German Johnson', and two other kinds of tomatoes but you don't remember what they were.

RC: The other one was a German, 'German Johnson' and I'm sure I know it was an English tomato.

EM: You don't know if it was a climbing tomato do you?

RC: No, I tried some tree tomatoes. I had about a 20-gallon pot and I run it to the top of the roof, at the back of the house there. It had tomatoes about every 12 inches [inaudible] but it didn't get very large. But the rind, the hull on the tomato was tough. I got a lot off the vines, just like you do with watcha call the tomato that people raise, 'Big Boy'. You get a lot off of that, but they're not very large. They're good tomatoes, but I just went ahead and used them just like I always did.

EM: These other seeds you used, were they sort of weird seeds. I mean they weren't the kind of seed that everybody had planted were they?

RC: [inaudible] I knew that there were four different varieties anyhow. And so, that's the way I developed them. I'm proud of them, and I don't save them to sell anymore. But I have heard a lot of people advertise them in the spring of the year, that bought them from me. They order from me every time I have them for sale, 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato plants, but I never had the name copyrighted which I should have. Then they couldn't have sold them for 10 years because the copyright was good for 10 years, but I didn't do it. That is about all I can tell you about the tomato plants.

EM: Didn't you say somebody from West Virginia sell them years ago, about 20 years ago?

RC: My brother-in-law [inaudible] died in 1969. Yeah, he raised them too. A lot of people up there, they still have them. I knew another fellow, Murphy [sic] down in Chapmanville, West Virginia, he raised it. He's been growing them for years. I gave him a plant. He's a good friend of mine. He's since gone with the Lord. The Lord left me here for all these years for some purpose. I don't know what it is.

EM: Breeding that tomato. [laughter]

RC: I'm just so proud that I could see my grand-boy, Ed Martin and his children. I hadn't seen him in over a year.

EM: Ah, I was down here last year. I cut the grass this summer. You forgot.

RC: Well, it needs cuttin' again too. [laughter] I did intend to get out there and cut it. I can only cut it for about 10 minutes at a time, and have to sit down for 10 or 15 minutes.

EM: Nothing wrong with that. You don't need to be in a hurry.

RC: I have to walk around the house quite a bit especially to get to the garbage can. [inaudible] ... if I didn't have grass to walk on.

EM: Let me pick your brain more. This 'Mortgage Lifter' grows six or eight feet high. None of the other varieties that you mentioned grew that high.

RC: If you stake them and keep them suckered, sucker them until they are about four feet high, they'll grow eight feet high. I've got some pictures in there I made when I was standin' and reachin' up. I'm six feet, and my arm would be about two and a half feet, maybe three or longer, and I couldn't reach the top of it. [inaudible]

EM: It had 2-pound tomatoes all the way to the top. I remember seeing them too.

RC: Yeah, they'll grow right up there and if they don't climb over, they'll bend over toward the ground and climb back up again.

EM: Where did the size come from though?

RC: Well, I don't know.

EM: The 'Beefsteak' is not a big plant. The 'German Johnson' is not.

RC: Well, another thing, the 'Beefsteak' and the 'German Johnson' is kind of a rough tomato. You can hardly find one like that. The fruits are perfectly round and smooth.

RC: You can hardly ever find one that is not perfectly round and smooth.

EM: I know some of these imitation 'Mortgage Lifter's I've seen look more like a 'Beefsteak'. You know they have big crinkles and big cores.

RC: Yeah.

EM: I know all of your 'Mortgage Lifter's are smooth. You can take a knife and go right straight through them and put them on a piece of bread and that was it.

RC: Yeah, they were big enough that you didn't have to take but one piece to make a sandwich off of it. I put the ... I had the president of the First National Bank to tell me that he always made his friend a tomato sandwich, out of his tomatoes and he always had to put two or three pieces on it. He said after he got this, he is just making a sandwich out of one piece for his next door neighbor.

EM: Let me ask you just one more question about it. The leaves on the 'Mortgage Lifter', you know they're not smooth on the edges.

RC: They're a bigger and flatter leaf.

EM: It's a big leaf, and it's a flat leaf and it doesn't have as many indentations, it doesn't have as many teeth on it as a normal tomato.

RC: That's right.

EM: It's smoother, but not perfectly smooth.

RC: It's a big and flat.

EM: Yes it's a big flat leaf, that's true. And I've never had that much blight on the bloomin' thing either.

RC: Well, I haven't had any trouble with blight at all. I've never had to spray my tomatoes. But you take these late ones out here. I was afraid they'd get full of worms, but they're not.

EM: You mean nematodes?

RC: No, they don't get into the tomatoes. I had a late crop. Anything late blooming you have to spray them because they'll get full of bugs, and eat the leaves off. I now raise them in my garden here right next to the fence. A lot of these runner beans: they're called butter beans and late fall I had to spray them. The bugs were eatin' the leaves all up. I put them out early now too now, and I never have to spray them. I haven't sprayed a tomato or bean vine or any of my garden for years.

EM: I've got blight in my soil up in the valley. Last year I raised a few 'Mortgage Lifter's from seed I had left from you. I raised 'Big Boy', 'Better Boy', and this super jumbo new 'Big Boy' or whatever. I got blight on every one of those things, and I didn't get a bit of blight on the 'Mortgage Lifter'. Now I'm surprised. I paid a lot of money for my others.

RC: Let me tell you how to prevent that blight. Get superphosphate fertilizer, and put about a tablespoonful, mixed in the dirt in the hill, and set the plant in there, and that will prevent the end rot and the blight. [ice cream truck music heard in the background]

EM: I use lime for my end rot too.

RC: Well the super phosphate has the lime and the calcium which you don't get in the other fertilizers.

EM: That's calcium phosphate isn't it?

RC: Yeah, that's what I use.

EM: You know, for a fellow who supposedly didn't have much education you sure use big words.

RC: Well, I have never been to school a day of my life, but anything I wanted to do, I done it. The first airplane ride I had ... I have the ticket in there in from 1928 in Greensboro, N.C. [inaudible] It was water cooled and it had a radiator on it. I was going to fly one day ... [inaudible] In 1946 I bought a little [inaudible] Cub, and that would beat you all to pieces in a 15-mile wind. [laughs] [inaudible] I flew in that. I bought in 1970 [sic], but anyway it had a 155-horse motor in it. Never had no trouble with that,

and I enjoyed flyin' that. I flew from '46 to '52. Never had a forced landing. Made that ... [inaudible] [ice cream truck music in the background] Ah, here comes the ice cream man. [laughs]

EM: I still wonder what made you want to breed your own tomato?

RC: Well, I have always had a mind to do anything that nobody else couldn't do. I have made several things. In other words, I had an eight-horse tiller, and I didn't like that thing, because it buried itself down in the soft ground. What I did, I welded two pieces across the front, and put a piece of pipe and welded that on it, and put a 1-/34" pipe inside of that, and I put a spindle and [inaudible], a flat [inaudible] on the end of it, and I bored holes through there so that I could set it to an inch deep, eight inches, any the depth I want. People look at it and said I ought to get a patent on it.

Well, I got a thing out there now, that someone last year said I ought to get a patent. You take a piece of good tiling, floor tiling, and put you a hole in it and run a water hose through it and put your sprinkler on top of that piece of tiling, and so it can't come off. That way your sprinkler never gets in the dirt. You take that out in the garden and leave it where you want it long enough [inaudible]. The sprinkler never gets in the dirt because its on that piece of tiling. [inaudible] You just take that piece of tiling and put a big enough hole to put the water hose through. A lot of people looked at that in the past year and said you oughta get a patent on that. Well, I said anybody could do that. [laughs] [inaudible] I think of things I had never seen.

I didn't have the money to finish the things that I wanted to do, but I learned to fly—if I could see—I lost my eyesight in '69. I can see at about eight inches what you can see at about 100 feet now. [inaudible] in the sunlight [inaudible]. I have been [inaudible] my grandson [inaudible] I don't see my face, but I get by anyhow. [laughs]

Well, I enjoy life. The only thing I'm sad about is that my wife has to go to the hospital Tuesday. She got to have an operation, probably Wednesday. I hope and pray that everybody will pray for her, that she'll not be up there long. The doctor said he thought it would be three, possibly four days to clear it up, but when the doctor tells you that, it could be a week or more.

I can't see to take my pills, they're sittin' there on that table and I have to take nine pills a day. I take one for the heart, and I have hardened arteries. I have to take three a day for that, and then my nerves. When I was in the hospital I had eight different doctors tendin' me. And the psychiatrist come in there and talked to me [inaudible]. I've been alright, and that was over three years ago.

EM: The problem is you quit making that homemade wine.

RC: Yeah, I used to make good drink wine. I cut that big vine down. I had one that was 60 or 70 feet long, and I cut it down.

EM: Let me talk to you about the seeds, just a second. You have not raised any tomato except 'Mortgage Lifter's from the time you came up with this tomato until the present, is that correct?

RC: After I perfected the 'Mortgage Lifter' to where it was weighing around 2 to 2-1/2 pounds. I have never mixed the seed with any other. I don't grow any other tomatoes so it will mix. I saved the seed. [inaudible] See those tomatoes on the fence right now. [inaudible] should have three years [inaudible] and we never buy nothin' yet. You don't mix them with nothin' else.

EM: And they breed back as 'Mortgage Lifter's. And you have been saving those seeds since the 40's?

RC: Yeah, I've been saving them since the 40's, [inaudible] the female tomato. That's the one that's got the streak across it, and the males have got a dot. But the female has a little streak across it. That is the one you save the seed out of.

EM: Okay, would you give me about two dozen of those seeds to go in the seed bank at the University of Virginia [to Jeff McCormack at Southern Exposure Seed Exchange].

RC: I don't know whether she has any out there right now or not. I guess she did. She always saves [inaudible] and lets it ripen dead on the vine, and saves the seed of it. I don't know how many she got now, but I expect she got about four or five dozen seed or more.

EM: I've got a newspaper article dated 1964, and I've got pictures dated 1964 and 1966 showing these tomatoes are yours.

RC: That's when they came up to my garden [inaudible] newspaper and made the pictures.

EM: That was long after you left West Virginia. Right?

RC: [inaudible] In 1964, see, I came here in '61 from West Virginia. In '64 I bought this house here. I lived across the street and bought this house. I was rentin' before then across the street. [inaudible] That was the best garden I ever built. [inaudible] I not figuring on doing much gardening next year. [inaudible]

EM: We'll see about that. Tell me again, your full name, all your nicknames, and when you were born, and where.

RC: I was born in Stanly County, North Carolina, March the 4th, 1900, and they named me—my mother had a friend who she loved so much and she named me after her. Her name was Marsha, but this woman's name was Cletis, so she named me Marshall Cletis, [laughs] and that's the reason I go by the nickname of Charlie.

EM: I take you don't like the name Cletis?

RC: No, I don't like to be called that because it's a woman's name. Of course I had nicknames when I was a little boy, they called me [inaudible] Tuetz?] [name of father was Tuett] whatever that is when I was young.

EM: I know what they called you in West Virginia, they call you Radiator Charlie.

RC: Oh yeah, if you go to West Virginia now and asked for Marshall Byles, I doubt if anyone would recognize it, only about a half dozen people knew it. They know me as Radiator Charlie. And most folks up there wouldn't know who it was.

EM: Had you done anything with any other plants, other than the tomato?

RC: [inaudible] No, I grew corn, beans, and my tomatoes. Got enough in there today to make tomato juice. [inaudible]

EM: I watched you sell plants for a \$1 a piece and if you go downtown or to a shopping center you can find two dozen for a \$1 any day of the week. And I know that people would line up. In fact I remember one year, several years, when you were taking orders. If they didn't get their name on the list by what, in the winter time, they didn't get tomatoes.

RC: Well, one time I took plants up to the radio station WVBA [sic] and showed it to the man and showed him tomatoes that I had frozen. We was on the air.

EM: It was three or four pounds wasn't it?

RC: I don't remember, it was an awfully big tomato, anyway when I got back home people were lined up so much they almost had to tell someone to direct the traffic. What I did, I'd get in the hot house and hand them out, and hand them to my daughter-in-law, and she'd hand them to the customers and take the money.

EM: At a buck a piece.

RC: I had people come here from Greensboro, North Carolina which is 50 miles away. I had people come on Sunday from Charlotte, North Carolina which is ...

EM: That's about 175 miles away.

RC: Pretty near, nearly 200 miles from Charlotte. And from another town near Charlotte where they heard it. I can't think of the name ... about 30 miles from Charlotte ... Belmont, North Carolina. Come here on a Sunday. I had a few scrubby ones out there [inaudible].

EM: Where is David House buried?

RC: He is buried in what they called New Mount Tabor, but when you were a young man, he gave four acres of land to the church, and my mother helped cook [inaudible] long building. And later on they went ahead and sealed [inaudible] and it was called at that time, House of [inaudible] named after my granddaddy which was a Cherokee Indian. He grew up around a place called Cooleemee, near the Yadkin River up in the mountains of North Carolina. They have a place that's still there called Cooleemee. That's where the Indians would go in swimming, to cool off. It's a little town, Cooleemee—its on the river.

EM: He was your granddaddy, David House? He was born in 1838.

RC: Son, I don't remember.

EM: I think so, but he was a Cherokee, he was one of those that didn't leave. Right?

RC: Yeah, and where he got the name House. Very few Indians at that time had houses, but this family had a big house, and that is where he got the name House. He named himself after his house.

EM: Who was his wife?

RC: She was was a Misenheimer. German. Her name was Mary.

EM: Mary Misenheimer. I thought I saw Maria on a lot of the records down there, when I went down there about 20 years ago.

RC: Her name might have been Mary Marie, I'm not sure. But anyway, they tore down the old church, and built a new church and they called it New Mount Tabor?

EM: And that is where he is buried?

RC: Yeah. And that is down in Stanly County, North Carolina.

EM: Near what town?

RC: Well, it would be near Albemarle. It wouldn't be any other town except a town called Richfield, about three miles from there. That's where I was raised, about three miles from Richfield, there in the country. That's [where] we used to cut cross ties and saw them into cord-wood. And when I was a kid, instead of being in school I was out cuttin' up, and helping saw down trees, to cut them up into cord-wood, to get them big enough as cross-ties. At that time we didn't saw cross ties. You hewed them out with an ax. You had a frame which you put on top of the log. after you cut the tree down, and you'd take the ax and mark it along that frame, and you hew into it about every three feet, and split a block out. It's what they call a joggle, split that out, and we'd use that joggle and we'd save them for the thrashing machine. They'd be dry by wheat thrashing time and all of us had a thrashing engine, a thrashing machine, and [inaudible] men would also burn those to the thrashing machine.

EM: A steam engine pulling the tractor?

RC: Yeah, yeah, thrashing engine, run by steam [inaudible]. They were oak and made for a very hot fire—it would burn so good. [inaudible]. We had to have everything ready to go.

EM: Alright, David House, and then who was your father?

RC: My father was Daniel William Tuett.

EM: Where was he from, Saint Mary's?

RC: No, he was raised near what you call it New London, that was about eight miles from where I was born, and I never seen my granddaddy Byles. My grandmother, she is buried out at New Mount Tabor. Her name was Christine Shaver. She was a Shaver before she married to a Byles.

EM: What a minute, your daddy was named Daniel William Tuett? How did you get to be a Byles?

RC: Well that was Byles, was Daniel William Tuett Byles. That was his middle name. And my mother's name was Eva Jeanette Misenheimer. That was German.

EM: That was David and Mary's daughter, was your mother?

RC: Yeah. On my daddy's side, Christine Shaver married Daniel Byles, my daddy's daddy. I never got to see him, but she moved into one of our houses for years before she died. I remember when she died. She had a word when she'd get mad, I never knew what it meant, she'd get mad and say "Ajusaba!" [sic] I never knew what it meant. She never would tell us. When she got mad, she'd say that word.

EM: Daniel Byles, what nationality was he?

RC: Well, I think we were English, English and German, probably German—Misenheimer. There is a little town down there now, named Misenheimer. They got a big school there. My grandson son, Matt Byles, he went to school there.

EM: What's the name of the college, Pfeiffer or something like that?

RC: Yeah, Pfeiffer College. I know our preacher, the one I used to love when I was a little kid, John Dennis, was a wonderful man. He lived there. And I remember going up to see him, and he'd been to Salisbury, North Carolina on the train. It was coming in at 11:00 o'clock that day, and I went down to the railroad station to meet him when he got off the train. [laughs]. I loved him so much.

EM: You actually were sorta raised out in the back woods then in a way.

RC: Well, we moved to town when I was 14 years old. I went to work in the cotton mills.

EM: Where, Misenheimer?

RC: No, Albemarle, Wiscassett Mills. And there was another big cotton mill, Efford Mill.

EM: That must be where the Belk [sic?] Efford Company came from, or some of those Effords.

RC: It is still there. I never worked at Efford Mill, I didn't like it. I worked at Wiscassett Mill, and I had a boss man, named Johnny Long, one of the finest fellows you ever met. I was just a kid when I went in there, and the three machines that I was runnin'. I didn't know how to ... I got behind in my work, and he come up there and tol' me, you're not keepin' up now. I said I'm doin' the best I can. He hung his black coat he was wearing, and his hat on a post, and went and showed me how to operate those machines. There was 28 cans of cotton, rolled cotton. It went through one machine to make a lap. Well, I run three of them machines. Well, he take back all of them [inaudible] that was just about empty and made three full ones of them. And [inaudible] make three cans full, and put these three cans full right at the end where if it breaks, that's where you splice it, so you could get it started in. From then on, I'd sit down half the time. He was one of the finest fellows you ever seen. His brother, Phillip Long was a second man, and I and his son [inaudible] Long were the best friends I ever had. Me and him stayed together seven years. We left Albemarle and went to Langley Field, Virginia and worked for the government there for about six months and then came back to Danville and to work over here. [inaudible].

EM: Where did you work over here?

RC: I was still working in the cotton mill, along the river.

EM: What was that car, I've seen pictures of a car you used to have?

RC: I bought a brand new Baby Olds in 1919.

EM: Somewhere there is a picture of that thing floating around.

RC: Yeah, I've got a picture of it somewhere, maybe two of them.

EM: You still got a picture of you in your dough-boy uniform? That old World War I one?

RC: Yeah.

EM: I want a copy of that one day. You were a big kid then.

RC: Well, I went and enlisted under age. I told them I was 18, but I wasn't but 17, and I was in the service about three months before they found that out and they gave me a discharge. And I had to ride a freight train from Greenville, South Carolina to Salisbury, North Carolina, because they didn't give me no money, when they found out I wasn't old enough I had to pay that to my [inaudible].

EM: The Baby Olds was a pretty car.

RC: It was a nice little car. The front springs was V-shaped, stuck out in front of the car, and it had a piece over it, big enough you could sit down and ride on it. I never seen a claim you couldn't break 'um, but I did.

EM: You broke 'um?

RC: Yeah, I went through there pretty fast, but I broke them. [inaudible] They claimed they couldn't be broke, but that was a beautiful little car, but I was going from here to Greensboro to meet my friend [Gary?] Long.

EM: Did they have paved roads back then?

RC: No.

EM: You mean the road was dirt from here to Greensboro?

RC: Yeah. [inaudible] just a slight incline, about a mile and a half, a little bit downhill. I had it wide open, and all of a sudden it started hittin' on three cylinders, and I got it to a service station. That didn't help. I got to Greensboro, and they pulled it and found the top of a piston—where the rings were on had come completely off—the top of the piston, and scored the wall to the extent that they had to put a new sleeve in it. It cost me \$135.35.

EM: You could have bought a new car for that back then.

RC: Oh now, I paid \$900 for a new car.

EM: Nine-hundred bucks.

RC: Yes sir.

EM: My golly.

RC: So, I brought it back here and traded it to John Dukes for a Model T Ford for \$350 difference, because I was afraid that sort of thing was going to happen again. I didn't have much faith in it after it happened.

EM: What was the best car you ever owned?

RC: DeSotto.

EM: What year?

RC: Oh, I had a 1948 DeSotto.

EM: I had a '49 Dodge. That was a good car.

RC: The best car I ever owned was that DeSotto. I drove that thing ... I came here and went to work in [inaudible city name] North Carolina I went to work for [inaudible "Brown?"] Motor company, and she was workin' here at the mill, staying here with her sisters, and I'd come home every Saturday. After I hit

58 from Emporia, Virginia, I'd go 75 to 100 miles per hour. Never had a bit of trouble with that motor. I know I had a good friend that I brought home with me for the weekend, and he was a head mechanic. He said, "How well do you think this is going to hold up at this kind of speed?" [inaudible] That was a really good automobile.

During World War I then, no it was World War II, I couldn't get no new tires. The tires got bad on it, so I sold it to a dealer. I sure wish I'd kept it. Just like the last airplane I had. If I had that airplane today, do know what it would be worth?

EM: No tellin'.

RC: Sixty-five thousand dollars. That's what that PT1980 [sic ?] would be worth today—if I had it, and if it was in the shape it was then.

EM: Let me ask you something. World War II was 30 years ago. When you were 10, 15 years old, old enough to know about it, the Civil War was only 40 years old. You understand what I am saying? The war between the North and the South? Do people talk about that back when you were a kid?

RC: Oh, my granddaddy House, he was a Yankee.

EM: House was a Yankee?

RC: Yeah, he joined the ...

EM: Why, because he was an Indian?

RC: I don't know why, never did. He was on the Yankee side. And right out here is the Yankee cemetery. I can see that.

EM: The Martins came from the mountains. There is no telling what they did.

RC: Well, see granddad was from up there in the mountains too. from western North Carolina. So I don't know.

EM: He was in the Federal forces, the Union forces?

RC: Yeah, he was in the War between the States.

EM: Did you have any idea what group he was in or anything else?

RC: No, we never knew none of his people, not any of his people.

EM: The Indians?

RC: Yeah, I just know, that sometime if I was able, and could see now, to go down into that country, to Davie County.

EM: Davie County?

RC: I'd love to go down there and see it. I'm sure there would be some House's living down there.

EM: House is a big name in North Carolina.

RC: If I were in the country were he was raised, I might have some relatives there. I'm sure he'd have some brothers and sisters, but we never knew none of them.

EM: If they are related to you, they are related to me.

RC: The only thing I remember my granddaddy telling me—it was winter. He, my daddy, and a couple more men were sitting out on the woodpile one Sunday and we were whittling on a piece of stove wood with a knife. Just sittin' there whittlin', and Grandpa wasn't. I said Grandpa, "Let me have your knife." He said, "I don't lend my knife to whittle." That is the only thing I remember him ever saying to me.

EM: He was telling you he didn't let his knife whittle? Sounds like a real Indian doesn't he?

RC: & EM: [laughter]

RC: He wasn't mean to us, but he didn't want to have too much to do with kids.

EM: What kind of guy was he though, other than that?

RC: Well, he was a man that everybody liked. If he every had an enemy I don't know it. Everybody liked him.

EM: Was he a farmer?

RC: He had a big plantation there. That's we inherited part of—my mother did, when he died.

EM: How big?

RC: Oh, somewhere around 260 acres.

EM: After the war, he wouldn't have had slaves. Did he have tenants?

RC: He told me, I remember him talking, and said his daddy ... [End of tape on this side. Begin side 2] ... slaves, and one of them turned on him, and great granddaddy House told the slave, that "I'm going to shoot you." And then the slave looked at him, and said, "Shoot me and be damned." So he went and shot him and killed him.

EM: David House's father killed one of the slaves?

RC: And I could almost put my finger on the spot where he is buried.

EM: Where they buried the slave? Where, what county?

RC: Where they shot him in Stanly County, near Richfield. I know the place right where they shot him.

EM: You know that makes sense, because the Cherokees were not savages, like most people think. They are the ones that owned the land, and in fact that is why they were deported. Did you know that?

RC: No.

EM: Did you ever hear of the Trail of Tears?

RC: No.

EM: Well, the Federal forces came in and rounded up all the Cherokees, and sent them down to Texas—made 'em walk. You didn't know that?

RC: No.

EM: Only ones that were left were those that hid, and they didn't live in tepees, in huts, or wigwams. They had by the turn of the century, by 1800, they had become very wealthy people because they learned quickly. And the reason they kicked them out, was because they had fine mansions. They owned slaves, the Cherokees owned slaves. Most people don't know that. I got this from the Graduate Department down at Appalachian State University.

Granddad, what you're saying makes absolute sense. Some people would think it was strange.

RC: When I was about five years old, about 1905, granddaddy built us a house, furnished the lumber and helped build a house, and paid for labor to give us five acres of land to live on, and then of course after he died, my step grandmother—she had been married twice. My original grandmother died, I don't remember her.

EM: Misenheimer died?

RC: Yes.

EM: And I've seen her picture too.

RC: He married Laura Eisenhower—same as Dwight Eisenhower name—and we never did call her Grandma. Well, we always called her Grandma Eisenhower. We didn't call her Grandma House. We kids couldn't accept her for some reason. The land belonged to her as long as she live. After she died, that's when they split up the land, and we got our part of it, as long as she lived, but done move to town then.

EM: Dave was a right well-off fella? House was a right well-off fella?

RC: Yeah, I think he owned 260 acres of land.

EM: What did he grow on it?

RC: He growed everything.

EM: Like what?

RC: Wheat, rye, oats, corn. Never raised no tobacco.

EM: No tobacco?

RC: No sirree!

EM: And he made money?

RC: No, I never saw a stalk of tobacco until I come to Danville. And before I come to Danville when I was workin' in the cotton mill I was always hearing Scoville. That's the only place I heard about it was at

the cotton mill, but when I came to Danville, [inaudible] it grew down there. I came in here one morning ...

EM: Scoville was was bigger than Danville then?

RC: No, it wasn't, and then they incorporated, it is all one town now. [inaudible] I came down here one morning and ate breakfast on Franklin Street, and asked a fellow where the cotton mill was. He said: "Just go right across that bridge there and walk up that railroad and you'll come right to the cotton mill. Scoville is back up here about 3 miles from there." So, I went to work down there. The boss man hired me and got me a [inaudible]. He told the lady he is going to work for me, and I was only about two blocks from where the mills was, on a street by the name of Adams.

EM: Tell me more about life down in [North] Carolina when you were a kid.

RC: Well, I know when I was about four years old. I lived in a house [inaudible]. You know the big spools the [inaudible] used to come on ... Well, Mama had a sewing machine and made our kid's clothes. I had one them big spools and was under the house rolling. Had me a little bridge, you know, across a little ditch, and I rolled that spool. Mama come out and said, "Come out from under there". I said, "What do you want?" She said, "You're going to work." "I'm too little to work." No you are not." I had a little bag put around my neck with a string on it and one going around my waist, and this bag would hold up to 5, 10 pounds of cotton. I had to go out and start pickin' cotton.

EM: You all raised cotton then too.

RC: Oh yeah. Yeah, that was a big money crop, cotton.

Three to five bales of cotton would weigh 500 pounds outside of seed after it was ginned, so cotton at that time would bring around 10 to 12 cents a pound, if it was ginned, you know, the seed picked out of it, and that was our money crop.

After we'd sell that cotton, they're were 10 of us all together. They put us in the wagon. They had straw in the two-horse wagon and it was 10 miles from there to town, to Albemarle. If we sold the cotton ... [inaudible] they'd take us all down and we'd go through the stores with Mamma and Daddy and pick out tools—buy winter clothes and shoes. We broke in shoes [inaudible] in winter time, and went barefooted in summer. That [broke in ?] shoe has a copper piece across the toe so you wouldn't kick the toe out. [laughs] I remember many, many times going down there. We'd always take dinner along.

And a lot of time, John Schwartz circus would come to town. We'd do the same thing on a holiday and go down there, and me and Mom and the kids would have to sit in the wagon and eat our dinner there, and go and pick out clothes. And they had a big parking lot and we'd see the parade. That's all that we'd get to see, but Daddy and the older boys would go to the shows.

EM: Because they were hoochie coochie shows probably.

RC: Well, I don't know. [laughs] [inaudible] John Schwartz had awful big shows, big tent shows, and had what they called side shows. I know one time my Daddy said someone went in there and came out laughin'. Another fellow, would go in there and he came out laughin'. A little sign out there said, "I want to show you something that you never thought about before, and something that really might save your life some time. Cost you a nickel to go in there." A man sitting there with a knife whittlin' and he said, "Always cut away from you, don't never cut towards you." [laughter] That's what they came out laughin' about. [laughter]

EM: He made a fool out of him.

RC: Oh, we had a lot of fun. I didn't have but one brother that was mean. That was George. He left home when he was 12 years old, bare-footed and bare-headed, never stayed at home no more. He was called the black sheep of the family, and last I heard of him, he was up in, what is this dry country that people go to for their health?

EM: Arizona, New Mexico?

RC: Yeah, he was out in Yuma Arizona, and the last letter I had from him, and later on they sent his clothes to my brother Joe in a suitcase. He died and they buried him out there. See, he worked on a boat. He went to work with the Merchant Marines, and that was during war time. Merchant Marines and there was a shipping boom. [inaudible] He's been all over the world on a boat. We had little cards from him from Hong Kong, places in Germany, England. Well, anywhere the boats would go, he'd work on a boat. And so he retired and went to Arizona for his health. He couldn't breathe good down home. Last time I seen him we were down there visiting. I reckon that was about three or four years before he died. So they buried him out there. I don't know who buried him. I guess he had money enough to take care of it [inaudible] but I'm sure where its at, I believe it was Tucson Arizona.

EM: Let me ask you something. How did you ever get into wrestling?

RC: Well, I was a member of the National Guard, and they put on wrestling bouts once a week down in the Army, and we kids, National Guardsmen, we didn't have to pay to go in there.

EM: I've always said you were a big guy.

RC: So, Joe Turner and [inaudible], and several others, I can't think of the name was wrasler's and they took a bunch of us boys, and put on amateur bouts, showed us how to put on amateur bouts. We'd have about an hour of amateur bouts before the main bouts come on—there in the Army.

EM: But you were a professional.

RC: Well, I did that on up in West Virginia and on over towards ...

EM: It wasn't what you call scientific wrestling, it was more like Judo compared to anything I've ever seen. Where did you learn that kind of stuff?

RC: Well that's what they taught us. In matches you're going to learn some holds yourself, that they didn't teach ya. In other words we wrassled then. We didn't get out there and fight, like they do now. They put on a show now. We went out there and wrassled.

EM: Yeah, I remember though I had some pretty stiff hand-to-hand combat a few years ago, and I remember you and I were playing around, and you did some mighty nasty things to me, and I was pretty good. You remember that? When was that, back when I was about 20 years, 20 to 23 years old?

RC: I wasn't mad or anything like that?

EM: Oh, I know that.

RC: I wanted to show you that I wasn't an old man, and not dead yet.

EM: You scared the life out of me.

RC: I taught my wife how to wrestle. I and her used to lay down on the quilt in the house in the bedroom, and I taught her holds. We were about 30 miles outside of Logan on a sand beach where we used to go up swimming on the Guyandotte River, up at a place called Man, West Virginia. I and a couple men were out wrasslin on the sand bar and there was a couple of women with us, and this one weighed about 160 pounds, and my wife said, "I can throw you over my head like that." She tol' her, "No you can't." So she threw her over her head and knocked her shoulder out of place. That woman screamed every five minutes from there—30 minutes back to town. I took her to Dr. [inaudible], a chiropractor, and he put her shoulder back in place, and so I don't think she has wrassled anymore since. But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my wrasslin.

EM: Were you ever afraid to go in the ring?

RC: No! The only thing, you go in standing in that corner looking at the man in the other corner, for that for 10 seconds before you ever touch each other. You never seen him before. You don't know what he is going to do, and that's the only time that you have any fear at all. Once you get a hold of each other, and know about what he can do, the fear goes away.

EM: The matches weren't rigged like they are now?

RC: No, we went in there. If he didn't throw you in 10 minutes you'd get a dollar a minute. Never lost but very few times. If stayed with him 10 minutes, he couldn't pin me. If he didn't pin me in 10 minutes, they give you a dollar a minute. They give you 10 dollars.

EM: You wrestled up in Ohio too, didn't you?

RC: Not in Ohio, over in Wilmington, Delaware, in Charleston West Virginia, in Logan, in Huntington, and I don't know, there were several different places. I had a good wrasslin partner for a while. Me and him was buddies, we were a team.

Photo from the *Danville Commercial Appeal*, August 3, 1964, courtesy of Ed Martin



They Call Those Big Tomatoes 'Mortgage Lifters'

M.C. Byles of Lee St. is shown above with some huge tomatoes he grows in his home garden called 'Mortgage Lifters' in West Virginia. Byles says his tomato shown in the picture will grow to an average of 2-1/2 to 4 pounds.

Mrs. Byles recently took four of the tomatoes and canned these to produce three full quarts of those. Byles is interested in introducing the tomatoes to the community. He says these continue to bear fruit until frost and that the fruit is tasty as found anywhere.

Robert S. Estler's claim on the name 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato

On July 7, 1987, I received a letter from Robert S. Estler of Barboursville, West Virginia. He claimed to have exclusive rights to the use of the name 'Mortgage Lifter' in connection with a variety of tomato. I am not able to find that letter. Likely, I gave it to an intellectual property attorney to investigate Robert Estler's claim. Included with his letter was a three-page history of 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato. That history appears below, not to validate his claim, but rather to include as an historical document, with my comments at the end. Here is the letter:

From 1913 to 1920 the late W. S. Estler of Barboursville, West Virginia, grew the famous 'Ponderosa' pink tomato. The 'Ponderosa', while a tomato gourmet's delight, was difficult to grow. It was subject to early blight, late blight, irregular fruit and blossom end rot.

At or about the same time, professional plant breeders developed the 'Pritchard' or 'Scarlet Topper' which in turn was an offshoot of the famous 'Marglobe' variety. W. S. Estler, a superintendent at a West Virginia coal mine, was not a professional plant breeder but in his home garden he hobbyed with tomatoes. He was fascinated with the delicious tasting 'Ponderosa' and the productive smooth red tomato, the 'Pritchard'. After many futile attempts to cross these two varieties he was about to abandon the effort when a single plant appeared in his garden bearing tomatoes with the good qualities of both varieties. Mr. Estler subsequently saved his seed from this plant and would not allow any other variety of tomato grown near his garden.

The big smooth reddish-pink tomato achieved local fame around the Barboursville-Huntington, West Virginia area. Each year the Estler family carefully selected only the choice fruits for seed and the unusual tomato went without a name. Local greenhouse operators sold the plants and one particular greenhouse operator finally managed to pay off his mortgage through the sale of the big pinkish-red tomato plants. Finally, in search of a fitting name, it was suggested to Mr. Estler that he christen his beauty, "The Mortgage Lifter."

Robert H. Estler (W. S. Estler's son) who now lives at Barboursville is quick to point out that the 'Mortgage Lifter' may or may not be a cross between the 'Ponderosa' and the 'Pritchard'. He also adds that it may have been a botanical accident in the garden of his father. The name, 'Mortgage Lifter' was patented and duly copyrighted [KK-108629] by the Estler family and any sale of the seed under the name 'Mortgage Lifter' is specifically prohibited; moreover the sale of the plants under the name 'Mortgage Lifter' may be sold only by the express permission of the Estler Family.

Around 1950 Adam Wagner, a somewhat renowned gardener at South Shore, Kentucky, was searching for a tomato variety that possessed the good qualities of the old pink 'Ponderosa' and the standard commercial red varieties. He purchased a basket of pink-red tomatoes from a Huntington, West Virginia market and they suited his taste and he saved some seed. Mr. Wagner in turn saved only seeds from selected fruits. The Wagner family has continued to save seed and grow the big pink-red tomato.

The History of the 'Mortgage Lifter' Tomato

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Only recently, John Howerton, Adam Wagner's son-in-law, learned that the tomato they were growing could be traced back to W. S. Estler's famous 'Mortgage Lifter'. In 1981, John Howerton of South Shore famous 'Mortgage Lifter' obtained 'Mortgage Lifter' seed from Robert H. Estler of Barboursville. His 1982 crop of approximately 800 plants was from the Estler seed and the Wagner seed mixed. John plans to select the seed from the best of the two strains of 'Mortgage Lifters'.

Will the 'Mortgage Lifter' find its place in the catalogues of the Professional Seedsmen? Will it find a place in the commercial market-place? Will it find acceptance in the palates of the World's Tomato Gourmet's [sic]?

The answer to all these questions is YES! Locally it has found favor in the home gardens and market-places. All those who taste it declare that it's the best tomato they have eaten.

The American public has been forced to accept mass produced vegetables with emphasis on mechanized growing, harvesting and marketing with taste and nutrition being of secondary importance.

The advent of the 'Mortgage Lifter' may reverse this trend and force professional growers to produce a quality tomato for that segment of consumers who demand the best.

Admittedly, the fruits are somewhat irregular; they come in all sizes; they must be staked, tied and pruned; they will not ship well; they will not lend themselves to any type of mechanical handling; they are thin skinned, choosy about where they grow; subject to all the vagaries of weather, blights, insects and tomato-eating animals BUT the 'Mortgage Lifter' TASTES wonderful.

Commentary on Robert S. Estler's claim

It is noteworthy that the genetic history of this variety is unclear. The tomato that appeared in his garden, was not the result of an intentional cross, but likely a tomato that had qualities similar to 'Ponderosa' and 'Pritchard'. If it was the result of an accidental or intentional cross, that would have been the F1 generation (the first generation, a hybrid). Importantly, the F2 (second) generation would begin sorting out with the progeny showing various different properties of the parent plants. There is no mention in this letter of attempts to stabilize the variety, or the diversity of the progeny (phenotypes)—only that he saved seed. The manner of so doing was not discussed.

The 'Pritchard' tomato was the result of a stabilized cross between 'Marglobe' and 'Cooper's Special'. It was first bred in 1926, and introduced about 1930. It was introduced under the name 'Scarlet Topper'. But after the death of its developer, F. J. Pritchard, it was renamed in 1932 as the 'Pritchard' tomato. It has compact growth. Fruits average about 4-1/2 to 6 ounces. Though disease resistance was not specifically mentioned, it was marketed as an early maturing, productive, smooth-fruited variety for home gardens, market gardens, and for shipping and canning. For additional information see the resource accessed from <https://digitalcollections.library.oregon.gov/nodes/view/309253>

The 'Ponderosa' variety was first released by Peter Henderson and Company in 1891. It is a mid- to late-season, beefsteak variety with few seeds. It produces fruits averaging 1 to 2 pounds. Growth is indeterminate, typically five feet tall, but may grow to six to eight feet with proper soil nutrition and tith.

William Estler mentions two strains of 'Mortgage Lifter', one of his own developmental origin, and another origin (circa 1950) from Adam Wagner's son-in-law, John Howerton. John Howerton grew 800 plants in 1982, a mix of the 1950 strain from Adam Wagner, and Ester's personal strain of 'Mortgage Lifter'. Eight hundred plants is way too large for a home garden. Thus it seems that John had to be selling the fruit (and seedlings?). According to the history provided, did Estler attempt to require a royalty fee? Note: Estler's copyright for the plant label containing the name 'The Mortgage Lifter' wasn't submitted and approved by the Copyright Office until June 20, 1955.

According to Estler's history, "*Local greenhouse operators sold the plants and one particular greenhouse operator finally managed to pay off his mortgage through the sale of the big pinkish-red tomato plants. Finally, in search of a fitting name, it was suggested to Mr. Estler that he christen his beauty, 'The Mortgage Lifter'.* That doesn't seem to make sense. What variety name were the greenhouse owners using for that tomato? In the greenhouse trade, it was not likely that greenhouse owners were selling tomato plants without variety names. As Ed Martin noted in the audio recording: "*It is my understanding that he [M. C. Byles] sold, traded something, somehow the rights locally, somewhere over in West Virginia, and those people took it and made a bigger business out of it.*"

William S. Estler claimed that the name 'Mortgage Lifter' was copyrighted and patented. The allegation that it was patented is false. The allegation that it was copyrighted is true, but that refers to a plant tag. There is more to discover in the narrative that follows later on.

Jeff McCormack's initial response to Robert S. Estler's claim

In retrospect, perhaps I should not have sent my response to Mr. Estler of his 'Mortgage Lifter' without first consulting an attorney, though I did consult an attorney later. A closer read of William Estler's variety history would have exposed inconsistencies and questions as noted above which I could have used to better understand the legitimacy of his claim. My letter appears below:

August 12, 1987

Robert H. Estler
Orchard Hills
P.O. Box 2
Barboursville, WV 25504

Dear Mr. Estler:

I am responding to your letter of July 7, 1987 regarding the Estler copyright of the name 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato.

I do not understand your use of the term "copyright patent" used in your letter. Although I was able to examine your copyright notice for 'Mortgage Lifter', I was unable to locate a patent. To my knowledge, seed (genetic material) can only be patented under the Plant Variety Protection Act. The first certificate was issued April 10, 1973. To date only one variety (a genetically engineered corn) has been patented through the U.S. Patent Office. If I am misinformed on this matter I would appreciate clarification (including the relevant patent number). Your letter contained a proposal for doing business with you. Before I could respond to that I would need patent information for my own protection as well as the protection of customers.

The History of the 'Mortgage Lifter' Tomato

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Clearly, the Estler family does have a copyright for the name 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato. It is not clear to me that the copyright extends to the genetic material. From the background information you enclosed ('The Mortgage Lifter', a three-page history) it is clear that your 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato is genetically different from the tomato developed by M.C. Byles as described on page 50 of our 1987 catalog. The seed in our catalog was developed in a four-way stabilized cross from parental lines different than the ones you described.

In summary, and in response to your request: (1) we do not have seed of your Mortgage Lifter tomato; (2) we will not use the name 'Mortgage Lifter' in our catalog, and (3) we will not offer or sell seed of your 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato without your written approval and license.

Thanks again for bringing this matter to my attention

Sincerely,
Jeff McCormack, Ph.D.
Director

Shortly after receipt of William Estler's letter and history, I requested a copy of his copyright application [KK 108428] from the Copyright Office of the United States. Meanwhile, I contacted Kent Whealy (co-director with Diane Whealy) of the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa. On that phone call, Kent and I decided to travel together from Charlottesville, Virginia to visit an intellectual property lawyer in Fairfax, Virginia. Kent offered to back me up on my story and proposed paying some of the legal fees, but I paid the fees myself. Afterward, we visited the Plant Variety Protection office in Washington, D.C.

A visit to the office of Sedam & Shearer, Attorneys at Law

After researching intellectual property lawyers, in 1987 I selected attorney Charles E. Shearer, Jr. at the firm of Sedam and Shearer in Fairfax, Virginia. Mr. Shearer's biography appears in "Who's Who in American Law", "Who's Who in the World", and "Men of Achievement".

In my discussion with Mr. Shearer, I suggested that I temporarily change the name from 'Mortgage Lifter' to another name until the legal matter could be researched and resolved. That was necessary because the legal matter had not yet been resolved by December 2, and I needed to move ahead in publishing our 1988 catalog. Accordingly, after our discussion, I chose to use the name 'Radiator Charlie's Pride and Joy' in the 1988 seed catalog, but retained the same 1986 catalog history of M. C. Byles 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato.

Cease and desist letter to Robert H. Estler from Glenn J. Sedam, Jr. of Sedam & Shearer, Attorneys at Law

January 29, 1988

Robert H. Estler
Orchard Hills
P.O. Box 2
Barboursville, WV 25504

Re: 'Mortgage Lifter' Copyright:
Southern Exposure Seed Exchange

Dear Mr. Estler:

The History of the 'Mortgage Lifter' Tomato

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This firm represents Southern Exposure Seed Exchange and Mr. Jeff McCormack in connection with the above-identified matter.

At our clients' request we have reviewed your letter of July 7, 1987 and have investigated your claim of exclusive rights in the 'Mortgage Lifter' name in connection with a variety of tomato seed. We have advised our client that you have no enforceable right in the 'Mortgage Lifter' name.

The federal copyright registration in question (Certificate No. 108428) appears to cover a label containing numerous words including 'Mortgage Lifter.' This gives no specific rights in the latter name alone. In addition under the federal copyright statute applicable to your copyright registration an application for renewal of the registration was due to be filed in 1983. We cannot find that such a renewal application was filed. Consequently, it is likely that any rights previously protected under the registration are now in the public domain, and therefore, unenforceable by you.

We trust that this matter is now resolved, and our client will receive no further demands regarding any uses it might make of the 'Mortgage Lifter' name for the seed variety in question.

Very truly yours,
Glenn J. Sedam, Jr.

cc: Mr. Jeff McCormack

When the 1988 seed catalog was printed, two-thirds of a catalog page column was devoted to 'Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter' tomato. Above the catalog offering of the tomato was a paragraph about the previous use of the name 'Radiator Charlie's Pride and Joy' tomato. It read as follows:

'Mortgage Lifter'—Notes about the name: Last year someone challenged our use of the name 'Mortgage Lifter'. While the challenge was under legal review we temporarily offered 'Mortgage Lifter' under the name 'Radiator Charlie's Pride and Joy'. The matter has been settled in our [and Charlie's] favor and we're pleased to offer it again under its rightful name 'Mortgage Lifter'. Furthermore, to avoid confusion of this variety with generic varieties of 'Mortgage Lifter' tomatoes and corn, we modified the name to 'Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter' tomato. This was done to document the distinct genetic identity and history of this variety. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused. The world is a large garden and there is room enough for everybody to cultivate a piece of happiness.

A visit to the Plant Variety Protection Office with commentary regarding heirloom and traditional varieties

In 1987, after visiting an intellectual property lawyer in Fairfax, Virginia, Kent Whealy and I traveled to

the Plant Variety Protection Office in Washington, DC. The purpose of that visit was to gain a better understanding of intellectual property rights regarding heirloom vegetables.

Specifically, we were interested in learning if undocumented, or poorly described heirloom varieties could be patented under the Plant Variety Protection Act of 1970. In the case of patented vegetable varieties, PVP certificate owners have the right to exclude others from marketing and selling their varieties, without permission, for a period of 20 years. PVP certificates have an exemption that allow home gardeners and farmers to save seed for their own personal use, but strictly forbid the unauthorized sale or transfer of such seeds and forbid the use of using PVP varieties for breeding purposes.

The vast majority of traditional and heirloom vegetable varieties are considered to be in the public domain. However, some of those varieties, especially family heirloom varieties, may not be well known, and they may or may not have entered interstate trade or commerce. For that reason, both Kent and I were concerned about the possibility that heirloom varieties could be intentionally co-opted or erroneously patented by corporate seed companies. In anticipation of that possibility, at the Seed Savers Exchange, David Cavagnaro was already photographing and describing many varieties of heirloom vegetables in order to create a database, partly to obtain better descriptions, and partly to help protect those varieties from being patented.

When Kent and I spoke about this issue with the plant variety protection officer, he said that awarding a PVP certificate to an undocumented or poorly described heirloom was very unlikely; however, it was possible. That said, there are other requirements for a PVP certificate of protection: the variety must meet standards of distinctiveness, uniformity, and stability. In my experience, many heirlooms may be distinctive, but they often lack the rigid uniformity required, and likewise, the lack of uniformity may affect stability.

After fairly extensive research I have not been able to identify an heirloom vegetable that has erroneously received a PVP certificate. However, popular heirloom vegetable varieties may have been used as foundational breeding material to create PVP certificate varieties. This is permissible. For example: the 'Kentucky Wonder' pole bean (1877) was crossed with 'Blue Lake' (late 1800's/early 1900's) to create the PVP certified 'Kentucky Blue' pole bean.

It might be useful at this point to define the term "heirloom vegetable". Various definitions abound in print and online, but the definition I have always used is that "any open-pollinated (non-hybrid) variety available prior to 1940 is classed as an heirloom". My definition was utilitarian, and not strict, and there are some exceptions noted below.

In reviewing the history of seed introductions, the introduction of hybrids was a pivotal moment: it began in the 1920's and accelerated quickly into the 1930's. The first commercially available hybrid seeds were corn varieties. These hybrids were defined as two inbred lines crossed to produce F1 seeds. Hybrid corns gave higher yields than many open-pollinated varieties, though in many cases had less nutritional value, specifically protein content. The merits and liabilities of hybrids require elaboration elsewhere. In any case, this definition of the crossing of two inbred lines represented a linguistic shift of the meaning of "hybrid" which has a longer history, usually defined primarily as crosses between species.

The term "hybrid" in this agricultural context represents a more restricted definition: the first hybrid corns were introduced in the 1920's. They rapidly overtook their open-pollinated predecessors, such that by the end of the 1930's they constituted about 95 percent of the Corn Belt varieties.

But the history of non-corn hybrid vegetables is a very different story. Other hybrid vegetables did not show up in catalogs until the 1940s' and 1950's. For example, the 1942 Burpee's seed catalog offered seven varieties of hybrid corn and 20 varieties of open-pollinated corn. The 1943 Wood's Seed catalog from Richmond, Virginia offered two hybrid sweet corns, 14 hybrid dent and flint corns, and 34 open-pollinated corns of various types (silage corns not included). Noteworthy is the fact that these catalogs contain no other hybrid vegetables. The first hybrid vegetable seed (other than corn) doesn't appear until the late 1940's and early 1950's, starting mainly with cucumbers, onion, and tomatoes.

During World War II, hybrid corn became scarce or unavailable. At that time, many farmers switched to open-pollinated corn and obtained a premium price for their seed.

Further developments about the name 'Mortgage Lifter'

After my visit with the attorney who solved the problem with the 'Mortgage Lifter' name, I thought that the history of the 'Mortgage Lifter' story was done. Then, in early March 1993, a thick manila envelope arrived in the mail. As we have come to realize these days, sometimes there is not a straight path to the truth. That letter seemed to put a bend in the path, suggesting I might want to consider a new direction, a different interpretation.

The mailer contained a letter and documents from John Marra, an extension agent in Cabell County, West Virginia. At the time, John Marra was also a regular contributor to a weekly column that appeared every Monday in *The Herald-Dispatch* newspaper, in Huntington West Virginia.

In John Marra's letter two documents were enclosed: (1) a copy of William Estler's three-page history that claimed proprietary rights to the name 'Mortgage Lifter'; and (2), an original newspaper article published in the Life section of *The Herald-Dispatch*. It was dated Sunday, February 28, 1993. The title of the article was "Talkin' Tomato: Have you ever heard of the 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato? It has its roots in Barboursville." John Marra had been promoting Robert Estler's story to the local and national press in the form of William Estler's claim. This was the most recent attempt.

Though, Robert Estler never challenged me again, he may have enlisted John Marra in promoting his 'Mortgage Lifter' claim. Meanwhile from 1988 to 1993, William Estler's son, Robert Estler continued to challenge other seed companies about his self-proclaimed use of the name 'Mortgage Lifter'. I no longer have the details and dates of those claims, nor the names of those seed companies, but if my memory serves, those claims continued after Robert Estler received the cease and desist letter from my attorney.

Following are excerpts from John Marra's article in the *The Herald-Dispatch*. In large part, the newspaper narrative borrows heavily from the 3-page history sent by Robert Estler, so only salient sections of the article are included below:

"...Estler was born in Pottsville, Pa., in 1884. He and his wife, Edith, married on June 21, 1910, and moved to Chattaroy in Mingo County, where he was a mine superintendent. Tension was high in the southern coalfields and raising a family during the historic Mine Wars had its tense moments, especially considering his occupation. ... They finally moved to Barboursville in 1920 and bought a small farm on the present site of the Orchard Hills Golf Course. ...

... Two tomato varieties were very popular around the turn of the century that were raised in the Estler garden: the 'Prichard' [sic] and 'Ponderosa Pink' [sic]. The 'Ponderosa Pink' [sic] is a pink tomato; the 'Prichard' [sic] is smooth red. The

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'Ponderosa' is very susceptible to early and late blight and doesn't have the round shape consumers desire; the 'Prichard' [sic] does. Estler was trying to crossbreed these two varieties.

W.S. Estler died in a house fire in 1968, but his son, Bob, still lives on the old farm place. He's quick to mention his doubts about whether the unusual tomato found in his father's garden was a cross between the 'Prichard' [sic] and the 'Ponderosa Pink' [sic]. He further theorizes that it might have been a botanical accident in his father's garden ...

... Clifford Smith, who was the greenhouse manager for Archer's Flowers, and Shorty Meadows, another worker, grew thousands of 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato transplants as early as 1930. Meadows gets credit for naming the tomato, according to Smith's son, Gene, who still lives in Huntington.

According to Gene Smith, in 1930 W. S. Estler lost all the 'Mortgage Lifter' seedlings he was trying to raise on the Orchard Hill Farm from pesticide injury. In a desperate move and because Clifford Smith was a well-known horticulturist, Estler gave him the remaining seed to grow transplants at the Archer greenhouse. This began a profitable symbiotic relationship for both parties ...

... In 1932 [sic], with the help of Huntington attorney Okey P. Keadle, now deceased, the name 'Mortgage Lifter' was copyrighted to protect its discoverer and help police the retention of its quality as one of the best non non-hybrid varieties ever developed ...”

There are several inconsistencies in this version of Robert Estler's history of his 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato:

- The 'Prichard' [sic] (aka 'Pritchard') tomato was not released until 1932. Therefore, if this narrative, if correct, 'Pritchard' cannot be considered a putative parent to the 'Mortgage Lifter', given that two years earlier, the 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato was being grown in a commercial greenhouse in 1930.
- There is no record in the U.S. Copyright Office that Huntington, West Virginia attorney, Okey P. Keadle ever obtained a copyright for the name 'Mortgage Lifter'. The copyright for the name 'Mortgage Lifter' is included among other words in the wording of a plant label that was copyrighted on June 20, 1955. That copyright was established by "Clarence A. O'Brien & Harvey B. Jacobson, 1406 G. Street, N.W., Washington, 5, D.C." My intellectual property attorney, Glenn J. Sedam, Jr., had remarked that the Copyright Office should not have accepted that copyright in the first place. He also said that the word 'Mortgage Lifter' was generic.
- In an interesting coincidence, in 1993, one of my employees, John Adkins, at Southern Exposure Seed Exchange remarked that he knew William Estler well because he was a tenant farmer on John's grandfather's farm in Barboursville, West Virginia. John used to go to school with William Estler's son, Robert Estler.
- In the audio recording Ed Martin says that M.C. Byles "would sell about a 1,000 plants a year. Once every five or six years he would slip over to West Virginia and get some more seeds. You know he had some kind of arrangement with somebody that he was allowed to do this ... It is my understanding that he sold, traded something, somehow the rights locally, somewhere over in West Virginia, and those people took it and made a bigger business out of it."

In writing a response to John Marra, I sent a fax dated March 5, 1993. It pointed out some inaccuracies in his article. Some text of that fax included the following wording:

“... There are some inaccuracies in your article. Other than the fact that we have a very different history on the origin and development of the 'Mortgage Lifter', I want to point out that the name 'Mortgage Lifter' is not copyrighted and is in the public domain. Mr. Estler claims a 'patent copyright'. There is in fact no such legal term ... is generic and in the public domain ... Mr. Estler is entitled to his story, but his claim of a copyright is completely without merit., as investigated fully by my attorney.”

What's in a name?

We now know that the name 'Mortgage Lifter' is generic. What other history can we find regarding the use of this name?. Prior to 1900 a variety name for a corn was listed as 'Mortgage Lifter'. Another popular recycled vegetable name prior to 1900 was “Ne Plus Ultra”, no longer much used in the twenty-first century, except mainly for some woody plants.

I found the following post on Tomatoville.com which was a popular online forum for amateur tomato growers, breeders, and heirloom tomato enthusiasts to discuss, exchange seeds, and collaborate on projects. Tomatoville.com was taken down by it's owner, Mischka, in December 2019. Prior to that there was a lot of discussion about both M.C. Byles and Estler's 'Mortgage Lifter' regarding those tomatoes and the origins of the name.

In an old Tomatoville forum, from 2012, I found a post by “Mike” (user name: “ABlindHog”) who contributed the following:

I don't have a dog in the 'Mortgage Lifter' hunt but please allow me to interject that the term 'Mortgage Lifter' has been a common term in agriculture since at least the late 1800s and has been used to refer to both livestock and crops, including:

- 'Mortgage Lifter' oats, which were exhibited at the Universal and International Exposition at Paris in 1878.
- 'Everett Mortgage Lifter' field corn was in an experiment at the Texas agricultural experiment station in 1895.
- In the 1900s dairy cattle were the queens of 'Mortgage Lifter's.
- 'Kansas Mortgage Lifter Wheat' is mentioned in a 1904 Ohio agricultural experiment station bulletin.
- Orpington chickens were advertised as 'Mortgage Lifter's' in The Country Gentleman in 1911.
- During the 1920s hogs in general and Berkshire hogs specifically were referred to as 'Mortgage Lifter's.
- Perhaps most famously DeKalb seed corn's "winged ear" logo first made its debut in 1936, appearing in an ad in Prairie Farmer Magazine with the slogan, "DeKalb Quality Hybrids Will Be Your Mortgage Lifter."

In conclusion, the best third-party verification of M. C. Byles 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato history comes from an April 20, 1989 letter from one of our customers, “Mr. T.G. Sedinger USN (retired)”, who resided in Shawsville, Virginia. He wrote: *“I am a former resident of Logan, West Virginia (1938-43) and as such have few good memories of that place and time. During that time I learned to read, was introduced to pinball (standing on a beer case at Bob Hatfield's beer joint), acquired my first pet (a duck) and ate tomatoes that were almost too large for me to hold. My grandfather, T. H. Sedinger,*

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provided all of the above—the tomatoes from Mr. Byles. Mr. Byles also repaired the radiator on our 1941 Chevy Fleetline. When our family moved to Huntington, W. Va. the tomatoes went with us—they lasted until I joined the navy in 1955. I believed this rarity was lost to me. Thank you and Charlie.

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