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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Hi, Wendy — This is a beautiful interview. I'd love to use it this week. —Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 'I have to come forth and acknowledge what the  
2 community has offered'

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Dummerston farmer Read Miller reflects on the  
4 catastrophic \$2 million fire and the subsequent outpouring of  
5 moral, practical, and financial support from the community his  
6 family has called home since 1792

####END SUBHED####

7 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

8 WITH US TODAY is Read Miller of Dwight Miller and Sons  
9 Orchard on Miller Road in East Dummerston. The farm goes back  
10 eight generations to 1792 — Millers all the way.

11 Read studied at the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at  
12 the University of Massachusetts, where he had the good fortune  
13 to meet his future wife, Malah. Together, they have three children  
14 and now one grandson, and they continue to work the farm with  
15 their son Will, another generation.

16 Many of you are aware of the devastating fire this  
17 summer that took the Millers' packing house, which is the farm's  
18 main operations building. Their loss has brought them  
19 tremendous community support.

20 Full disclosure: My husband and I lived on Miller Road  
21 for 17 years, next door to Read and Malah and next to Dwight's  
22 sister. (Now, "next door" on Miller Road is an acre or two, at  
23 least, right?) So we saw a lot of Read and Malah going down the  
24 road to one thing or another. Those were really good years.

25 \* \* \*

26 **Wendy O'Connell:** So, Read, you grew up on the farm.  
27 You not only did you grow up on the farm, but as I said, going  
28 back generations and generations of that land, that piece of land.

29 **Read Miller:** I was very, very fortunate to be born into  
30 that opportunity. And for me, that's what I have always identified  
31 our farm as — an opportunity. It was an opportunity to learn, to  
32 watch, to build, to take in things.

33 And part of what is really important to me is to be able to  
34 return that opportunity to my children. I have an obligation to  
35 carry on, to give forth the same thing that I was given, which is  
36 that opportunity

37 **W.O.:** And you and your three sisters all worked on the  
38 farm?

39 **R.M.:** Everybody has worked there. My kids have worked  
40 there. My siblings have, my parents both, my cousins have  
41 worked there. Most of them, they've either helped build or  
42 they've done various farming projects.

43 I've heard these stories from a cousin that I never knew  
44 who was in his 70s or so: "I helped your dad," "I helped your  
45 grandfather," "I knew your grandfather."

46           W.O.: I always thought of you and your father, Dwight,  
47 as being philosophers of sorts. I think you have to be  
48 philosophic a bit to be in the farming business, for one thing.  
49 I'm going to leave this open for you.

50           R.M.: When I was a little kid, I asked my grandfather,  
51 "What's retirement?" And he looked at me and he said, "Read,  
52 'retirement' is a young man's word." And now that I'm my age  
53 and most of my youth is gone, I can feel what he meant in the  
54 sense that I am not retiring.

55           When we talk about those sorts of things, it's what a  
56 younger person would think of. Now that I'm approaching  
57 slowing down, am slowing down, I'm going to do what I want as  
58 I can. But I will be here always.

59           W.O.: I don't think farmers ever really retire.

60           R.M.: But I chose it. And that's one thing that is really  
61 important for me — and for those who are immediate to me —  
62 to understand when things get unpleasant, difficult, unexpected.

63           I chose to be here. I am constantly reminding myself that  
64 this is a choice that I made. I choose to not do other things. I  
65 wanted to do this. I still want to do this, and that's the platform  
66 that I approach what I'm doing now. I want to rebuild this.

67           My first priority, Wendy, is I have a family. The first thing  
68 we need to do is to make sure that this family is together and that  
69 we're not putting undue pressure onto each other, that we're not  
70 having false expectations, and that we all respect and appreciate  
71 what is coming to our plate that needs to be addressed, and not  
72 to set our expectations above what can be done. It is about how  
73 we as family come together and move forward.

74           And the other thing that I know is at my age is that it's  
75 not my turn. It is. Not. My. Turn.

76           The building [that was destroyed in the fire] was my  
77 property. The insurance policy is [on] my property. There are  
78 certain things that I have to do because there are certain large  
79 responsibilities in regards to the fire that are on my shoulders and  
80 no one else's. But as we look forward, past the things that have to

81 be done — because they have to be done — it's not my turn, and  
82 the kids will be — are — involved in this.

83 **W.O.: And that's Will and Ruth and Martha and your**  
84 **grandson.**

85 **R.M.: And extended family. It's not just three kids.**  
86 **There's three marriages there. I mentioned needing to listen [to]**  
87 **everyone tell their story. In order for them to hear me, then I**  
88 **need to listen to what they want, too.**

89 **W.O.: What's amazing to me is how many family farms**  
90 **there are in the area, how many people who've been working**  
91 **the land for a long time, like the Darrows and Lilac Ridge, the**  
92 **Robb Farm, Gaines Farm, Walker Farm.**

93 These are all families, and I can see where — obviously  
94 — it's more than a job. It's your life.

95 **R.M.: It is. We've had catastrophes in the past. We've**  
96 **had crop losses, we've had a whole lot of other things. We've**  
97 **lost family members.**

98 But when you have gone through a catastrophe —  
99 whether it's financial, whether it's emotional — and you have  
100 been able to come through again, to [rebuild] knowing that that  
101 pain can be moved through and around, it's easier to go through  
102 problems like what we have now. Because we have done this.

103 I'm not going to suggest that catastrophes are any way  
104 removed or softened. But when you feel in your heart that this is  
105 another problem that we can address, it's easier to approach it  
106 that way. You feel like there is another side. That might be  
107 different, but there is another side.

108 **W.O.: I was thinking about that kind of thing in terms of**  
109 **just simply the weather, right?**

110 **R.M.: My family are weather junkies, and the weather is**  
111 **new, because of our climate change, etc. I grew up in a family**  
112 **that had been doing things outside of the box weather-wise**  
113 **forever. You know, we were [growing] peaches and strawberries**  
114 **back before Civil War.**

115           And so when I listened to my father, we were watching  
116 the weather as it related in wintertime to peaches.

117           The nicest gift that I ever gave to my father was when I  
118 was in high school, I gave him a recording thermometer. And it  
119 was his religion. You know — “Did you change the paper?” “I’m  
120 going on vacation — could you look after the thermometer?”

121           Something as simple as “what was the high and low of  
122 Feb. 25?” doesn’t mean much to most, but we can pull those out.  
123 Not only do we have diaries from generations, but that just gives  
124 you an example of how we looked at our farming practices.

125           It wasn’t just, “OK, we’re growing strawberries and  
126 apples, is it going to frost tonight?” It was how we lived and died  
127 by small minutia with Mother Nature and how we tried to find  
128 ways to to push back on some of the risk.

129           **W.O.: Have you noticed a big change in the weather**  
130 **over the years, just in your lifetime?**

131           **R.M.: There’s 45 minutes right there! We’ve done**  
132 **climate-change sugaring, which has involved actually making**  
133 **syrup from the same tap hole two years in a row. I have actually**  
134 **picked strawberries and made syrup on Thanksgiving. I have**  
135 **picked strawberries and made syrup on Christmas.**

136           A lot of the work that I did in the early 2000s is actually  
137 no longer relevant, because the weather has changed so much in  
138 that in the last 10, 15 years.

139           **W.O.: Really?**

140           **R.M.: Yeah.**

141           **W.O.: Wow.**

142           One short little story that I think is relevant, is, we used  
143 to live across from the peach orchard, and one night, there was a  
144 frost coming. The peach blossoms were blooming. And we  
145 looked out at what looked like a Civil War camp, with all of these  
146 boxes of fires.

147           I ran up to Dwight the next day, and I said, “Hey, we saw  
148 it.” He said, “Yeah, we have these. You know, all of our wood

149 goes into these boxes, and you know, it helps, it helps keep the  
150 blossoms from freezing.”

151 He said, “In the old days, we used tires.”

152 **R.M.: The old days — that was in the ’60s, before things**  
153 **changed in the ’70s. Yeah, things are a little different now.**

154 **W.O.:** Did you ever think at all, Read, of doing  
155 something different when you were younger? Or now?

156 **R.M.: That’s not really quite a fair question, because in**  
157 **the sense of fairness, I do things differently all the time. I have**  
158 **an interest in biology and science. I get to explore that all the**  
159 **time. One of the things that I am keenly aware of in my later**  
160 **years is relationships, and I enjoy them, and I make it a point to**  
161 **continue to build and improve.**

162 Probably Mahla helped in the sense that she told me  
163 years ago, “Read, everybody has a story. And if you want yours  
164 heard, maybe you should be listening to theirs, too.” So whether  
165 it’s science, whether it’s everyday life, or whether it’s finances, it’s  
166 always there, and there’s always an opportunity.

167 I think in some ways, my family might get upset with me  
168 a little bit because I do what I want. And I hear about it.

169 **W.O.: Your family has been public in a lot of ways —**  
170 **not only things from like your mother Gladys and the**  
171 **Dummerston Apple Pie Festival and all of the preserves and**  
172 **things that she put up. And then Mahla, of course, doing that as**  
173 **well. Also, Dwight acted a bit in some local productions ...**

174 **R.M.: *The Equivalent Lands*, written by Joe Greenhoe.**

175 **W.O.:** And you also were one of the first farms on board  
176 with the Brattleboro Farmers’ Market.

177 **R.M.: The Brattleboro Farmers’ Market celebrated our**  
178 **50th anniversary this summer. Actually, last year was the 50th,**  
179 **and I personally was at the very first farmers’ market. My father**  
180 **was one of the founders, [along with] Howard Prussack [and] a**  
181 **few others.**

182 It’s been a pleasure to see the community and the market  
183 build together and to be supportive and helpful with each other

184 and provide an opportunity for a lot of small farms to start.  
185 People don't realize how important that can be, that sometimes  
186 everybody needs an opportunity. And the farmers' market can be  
187 an opportunity for people to start up.

188 **W.O.: Very much so.**

189 There are so many younger people going into farming,  
190 which kind of blows my mind a bit.

191 **R.M.: It's good. Yeah. It's different.**

192 **W.O.:** Different kinds of farming?

193 **R.M.:** No, no — it's different in the sense that when I  
194 was a kid, I was a "dumb farmer." In the '60s and '70s, I was a  
195 farm kid, and farmers at that time had the stigma of "you're a  
196 dumb farmer." Then in the '70s, and as the '70s gave off to the  
197 '80s, it was, "You're cool."

198 And so the generation that is coming up now in their  
199 youth have the opportunity to be cool. My peers were not. But  
200 we're doing the same things.

201 So I think it's great that our society has changed and is  
202 inviting the next generation to try and to be involved in providing  
203 their good food.

204 **W.O.:** Right down the road you've got Bunker Farm  
205 kids. (They're not kids, but to us, they're kids.) And Full Plate is  
206 nearby. Rebop Farm, which is doing an interesting amalgamation  
207 of different things, including meat and raw milk and that kind of  
208 thing. So I found it very heartening just looking at it from the  
209 outside — younger people are really stepping and being  
210 involved with the community.

211 **R.M.:** And those farms, I know them all, and they're all  
212 welcomed. It's nice to see youthful energy. And every so often I  
213 see that they go through the some of the same things that I have  
214 gone through.

215 **W.O.:** And their lens is different, too. Of course,  
216 they've grown up with climate change from the get go, so that's  
217 something that's built into how they farm.

218 **R.M.: When I went to school I studied business, too, and**  
219 **law as well. And when [I studied] agricultural finances, [I**  
220 **learned] some pretty simple formulas.**

221 But in the formulas that we looked at, nobody ever put in  
222 risk.

223 It is a number that exists in reality. It's never taught to you  
224 by a banker; it's not taught in school, to my knowledge.

225 I would encourage any young farmer or someone starting  
226 out to be aware that the simple math that you did on the napkin  
227 to get a loan or to go through this — you can take a number or  
228 two, and you can add the risk factor in there, which you probably  
229 are not even aware of. That might be an emotional number as  
230 well. And ask: "Do I have the finances to pay for the risk? Can I  
231 emotionally support myself and my family through that risk?"

232 Those are things that are. Not. Taught.

233 **W.O.: And gosh, a farmer's life is filled with risk. You've**  
234 **seen fire, you've seen rain, you've seen early melts, you've seen**  
235 **maple syrup that isn't running, you've seen the equipment — the**  
236 **whole equipment piece of it now is different than you were a**  
237 **kid, too, right?**

238 **R.M.: And it does not come when you might be ready**  
239 **for it, or when you're expecting it, and you might have three or**  
240 **four [catastrophes] in a row, and you're saying to myself, "This is**  
241 **not fair." And one of the first lessons that I learned when I was**  
242 **12, 13 years old is that life is not fair.**

243 So [you just need] to set that aside and move through the  
244 equation that is your life.

245 When we're kids, we're worried about, Do I have a  
246 girlfriend? What's my school like? Do I have a job? What's my  
247 work going to be like? Now that I'm retirement age, I think about  
248 the aging process.

249 But every one of those aspects is an equation that needs  
250 to be understood and worked through to make myself and my  
251 family happy. And so the reason I keep coming back to all these



252 little things which are part of life — this fire that we’re talking  
253 about is part of life.

254         When the fire was still fully involved and my family was  
255 there, we were getting offers of support. And Martha or Will  
256 would come to me and say, “You know, Dad, how do you feel  
257 about this [offer of support]?” And I would say, “I can’t deal with  
258 it. You take care of it. I’m comfortable with you following through  
259 on how you want to approach that.” Which they did, and I  
260 trusted what they did.

261         And very clearly, the community reached out and said,  
262 “We support you. Now.”

263         One of the things that I did while we were still hot is  
264 thank the fire service. I used to be an EMT/fire guy, and there’s  
265 always a point in someone’s life when there will be a need. You  
266 may not have gotten there yet. But whether you’re doing hospice,  
267 whether you have a new baby, whether you’re having, struggling  
268 with school, there can be someone there to support you, to help  
269 you.

270         So to the community and the fire service [and everyone],  
271 I want you to know how important what you have given to me  
272 was. We will all need that at some point, and you need to be  
273 aware that you are appreciated for what you have given.

274         **W.O.: Well, you just did a really good definition of what**  
275 **community is and can be, right?**

276         Looking back at the farm, you’ve grown a lot of  
277 diversified crops, right? Strawberries, peaches, you’ve got a maple  
278 sugarbush that’s going on, apples, pears, blueberries, raw honey,  
279 of course, maple syrup. But you also had some animals for a  
280 time.

281         **R.M.: Well, the you lived on the road for a minute or**  
282 **two, and there are four or five barns that were affiliated with**  
283 **the family. My father was a big sheep guy. He was the national**  
284 **president of the Southdown Breeders Association, so he was**  
285 **nationally renowned for sheep.**

286           Originally, our farm was a dairy farm, primarily. That  
287 farm was then taken by Arthur Lyman Miller out to West  
288 Brattleboro, who then took it to Vernon. And so [his descendents]  
289 Peter Miller and Arthur Miller are in the dairy trade in Vernon,  
290 which originated on Miller Road [in Dummerston].

291           I do farming. Have done farming. I am not a look-at-me  
292 person. I will be at home trying to crack a case, trying to  
293 engineer, trying to figure out something that seems to me doable.  
294 Consequently, I'm not around a lot to talk about Miller things,  
295 farming things. I don't do that. I'm not afraid of it — it's not me.

296           We have a lot of interests, and we just do them. It's not  
297 like, "OK, this is what I used to do, and I got to tell you about it."  
298 It's like, "I have another idea. Let's see what that is. I have an  
299 interest in this other idea."

300           The only reason that we stopped raising animals was  
301 because when Covid came through, we couldn't get slaughter  
302 time. Covid interrupted everything normal.

303           **You know, Covid was an odd thing. I sold — sell — a lot**  
304 **of maple syrup commercially in the Boston area. I also sell a lot**  
305 **of cider vinegar. You heard about the size of the loss in the fire,**  
306 **which was 30,000 gallons of vinegar.**

307           So at the time of Covid, I was selling maple syrup into a  
308 chain of restaurants, and my buyer calls me up and says, "I'm  
309 canceling all my orders because the restaurants are shutting  
310 down."

311           A day later, my cider vinegar sales go through the roof  
312 because now I'm selling a healthful tonic.

313           So I'm not saying that it averaged out, but I'm saying you  
314 just don't know. And all of this happened within a week of each  
315 other. When we went from 0 to where-are-we-going-to-buy-the-  
316 bottles-to-package-all-that-vinegar?

317           **W.O.: It's like the weather, right? It's changing all the**  
318 **time. That's interesting, though — I didn't even think of Covid in**  
319 **terms of how it affected you guys.**

320 **R.M.: It's [also] a family thing. I enjoy animals. I**  
321 **consider myself a livestock person as much as anything. But my**  
322 **kids aren't.**

323 I like to do veg as well. When my son came home from  
324 school, I tried to get involved in that, and he was doing all of the  
325 apples primarily. And I said, "You know, let's plant more of  
326 something." And he said, "Dad, I'm not interested."

327 And at that time, finances are well enough around fruit.  
328 So we stopped doing acres and acres and acres [of vegetables]  
329 and processing and going to the big guys. You know, it's listening  
330 to what someone likes to do, and the chances are, if you like it,  
331 you're going to be good at it.

332 You know, one of the things that Will really likes is bees.  
333 My grandfather had bees, my dad had bees, I had bees, and Will  
334 is a beekeeper. And of all the things that we've ever done, bees  
335 are the one thing that we've never made money on.

336 I know I can go down through the list and say, "Oh, yes,  
337 at one point, that was good" or "Oh, but we had a bad crop." I  
338 had a break-even year on bees and honey, that was a good thing.

339 **W.O.: Yeah, but they're out there pollinating.**

340 **R.M.: They're doing it. And Will, to his credit, has been**  
341 **asking to get a license for the farm to make mead. He's made**  
342 **some. It's a great interest of his, and so we're not pushing**  
343 **[beekeeping] back.**

344 **W.O.: Well, it's interesting, because everybody does**  
345 **have their own interests, and being able to accommodate that is**  
346 **really a wonderful thing.**

347 **R.M.: You know, I have the utmost respect for my**  
348 **second cousins down on the Vernon farm, where they're**  
349 **marketing their milk, etc. My family has been marketing and**  
350 **selling for generations. You know, I used to peddle with my**  
351 **father, my grandfather. We grew up growing and selling.**

352 With all the things that are going on with the weather,  
353 etc., one of the things you don't want to do is have the crop

354 noose around your neck and either have no margin, or make sure  
355 you can sell it for a profit.

356 As the kids were growing up, there's certain things that  
357 Martha was tired of me [saying]. She said, "Don't say that again,  
358 Dad." One was "opportunity cost," and the other was "I don't  
359 care whether your neighbor has green equipment or blue  
360 equipment. If you're going to do it, you start with margin because  
361 I can't work harder than my neighbor. I'm not smarter than my  
362 neighbor."

363 It's like I need to know where I have that margin to offset  
364 that risk factor.

365 **W.O.:** You've got to be pragmatic.

366 **R.M.:** I guess so.

367 **W.O.:** And nimble enough to be able to weather the risks  
368 as well. And again, it sort of goes back to family. It goes back to  
369 community. And I know that the fire....

370 **R.M.:** At the time of the fire, we had just come back  
371 from farmers' market, and we were successful that particular  
372 day because we had no perishables put back in the cooler, so we  
373 didn't go to the building.

374 We got a call from one of the neighbors saying, "You  
375 know, your building's on fire." I actually said to whoever called,  
376 "Call it in," and I dropped the phone. And Malah and I were up  
377 the road. I was up there half dressed all day and all evening.

378 This fire does not define us. Does *not* define us. It's  
379 tragic, it's there, it's happening now, but it *does not define us*.

380 **W.O.:** And at the same time, you've got the family that  
381 defines you and the family that's there for support, and that's the  
382 main thing. The community really stepped up.

383 **R.M.:** They did. It was a \$2 million fire. [We had]  
384 insurance, [from] which there is some, but not nearly enough.

385 The community — approximately 650 people — came  
386 through with donations that were over \$100,000.

387 There's a reason why I'm talking to you today. How many  
388 times have you asked me [to come on the show], Wendy?

389           **W.O.:** Many times.

390           **R.M.:** I have said no to you half a dozen times because  
391 **it's not my personality. But this is a moment where it's — I**  
392 **cannot be me right now. I cannot be the guy that sits over there**  
393 **and problem-solves and rebuilds.**

394           I have to come forth and acknowledge what the  
395 community has offered. Thank you for the offer, and it will be  
396 employed and reciprocated.

397           We all have a need at some point, and I would  
398 encourage young people to come forth and volunteer, to do those  
399 sorts of things. You know, I grew up in a volunteering family —  
400 that's what we did, that's what I was shown.

401           And so this offer of thanks and gratitude is in part to say:  
402 Please continue [volunteering] if you haven't. If you're not sure  
403 how to be part of your community, come forth and do something  
404 to help someone else.

405           **W.O.:** Now you are moving forward, and you've got a  
406 **whole support system in the farm.**

407           **R.M.:** If you drive by the site, you would say it's not  
408 **moving forward. But we're opportunists — [that's how] one of**  
409 **my farming neighbors (Don Hazleton) referred to me.**

410           We bought a sawmill — a full-blown, get-out-of-our-  
411 way-we're-sawing-production-lumber sawmill.

412           The reason is that we need hundreds of thousands of feet  
413 [of wood] to rebuild that building. We have a lot of stumpage.

414           But it's also an opportunity down the road. If Will, or my  
415 son in law, or some other member of the family wants to be in  
416 production retail sales of lumber, it is a value added. There's  
417 stumpage over there, there's a mill there in the middle, make  
418 something for cash flow. The [wood used in the] building that  
419 burned all came from the farm. I worked with a lot of mills, and  
420 had mills on the farm as well.

421           I bought this mill thinking, "It's not for me." I'm older. I  
422 don't need to have a sawmill. But it fit, and I am very pleased the

423 way that the family has stepped in, and now it's their mill. It is  
424 their mill. It's their machinery. It's their opportunity.

425 **W.O.: Yeah, it's another asset in the farm.**

426 **R.M.: So if we were to say that is a bright spot, you**  
427 **wouldn't know it when you drive by the building. But it's going**  
428 **on right now. It is an opportunity that we have worked towards**  
429 **capturing.**

430 **W.O.: I think that, as you've seen and what we talked**  
431 **about with younger farmers, there's a much greater appreciation**  
432 **from where our food comes from, and we live in a place where**  
433 **we can actually go and visit people who are growing our food.**

434 And therefore it's that wonderful circular thing of  
435 supporting each other.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

436 **WENDY O'CONNELL** hosts the award-winning series  
437 [Here We Are: Brattleboro's Community Talk Show](#), which airs  
438 weekly on Brattleboro Community Television and features  
439 conversations with a very wide variety of local people of all ages.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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