Interview with Russ and Mary Jeckel

AIS-V-L-2008-023

May 15, 2008

Interviewer: Dick Hull

Hull: (30-second pause) Hello. My name is Dick Hull, and I am a volunteer at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Today is Thursday, the fifteenth of May, and we are at the Jeckel Pork Farm, in Delavan, Illinois, to interview Russ and Mary Jeckel. Russ, what is the size of your operation today in crops and livestock?

Jeckel: We farm about 1,450 acres. (silence) Part of this is owned and part of it's leased and part of it's rented. Crop-wise, about 950 acres of corn and 400 and something acres of beans, and thirty acres of wheat, and I think there's some CRP. That covers about 1,450 [acres], and then at the present time, we're feeding pigs, contract feeding, and we have a one-time capacity of about, probably around 18,000 [pigs] at one time, or an annual throughput of about 36,000. So that's basically it, Dick.

Hull: I see. Now, you have some family that's involved in the farming right now?

Jeckel: Yes. We have five children, and our youngest son Scott is managing the farm. And my job from time to time is to make sure that I am out of the way. (laughter) And they live not far from us, and we have a wonderful relationship. They have two small children which we enjoy very much, and so it's working out very well.

Hull: How many grandchildren do you have?

Jeckel: I think we had twelve. I think eleven living grandchildren.

Hull: When did you move to this premise?

Jeckel: Dick, my parents used to farm south in a little community east of here, Hopedale. And it was kind of out in what I always referred to as the middle of nowhere, and we moved here in 1930. And I always felt the main reason that my parents did come here was that we were going to be near a community school [Delavan], and I still feel that way and I thank them for that. And we were just a short distance up the

railroad track and there was the grade school. But we came in 1930, and we're still here. We often say tongue and cheek and probably rightly so that we can't afford to move because we've accumulated so much stuff over the years.

Hull: So you attended high school here in Delavan, right?

Jeckel: Yes, yes.

Hull: After you graduated from high school, we were in the middle of World War II. What did you—initiated your thinking to join the Navy?

Jeckel: Well, I guess one of the primary reasons was that I thought I could—I'd rather be on the water than on the land, and so I did it. And I think I had a couple mentors that I followed a little bit, and so yes, I did enlist directly out of high school and went to the [Great Lakes] Naval Training Station and spent some weeks there. And then took some tests, and they said I had some aptitude for radio communication, so I went to radio school [Madison, Wisconsin] and then—I don't know how far you want to go with this—but I was sent aboard a heavy [naval] cruiser to the South Pacific.

Hull: I think I have a picture that you want to show at this time?

Jeckel: Yes. This was the [heavy cruiser] U.S.S. Pensacola. Calls it short, CA24, built in the twenties. And we had some [two] catapult airplanes and so in a sense, it was kind of a relic but it kind of pulled us through, and we [nearly] missed some torpedoes and all that sort of thing. [and a kamikaze plan in the invasion of Okinawa]

Hull: Now, your Naval experience and service was interrupted. Can you tell us when and why?

Jeckel: Dick, [I] served about twenty-two, I think, twenty-two months, and got a little early reprieve because my father was hurt in a train accident. We have a train track running right in front of the house, and was kind of a habit to cross that thing [track] without maybe seeing what was coming down the line, and so he was hurt and so I got a special release from the service to come home and help him farm.

Hull: And did he recover from that injury?

Jeckel: Yes, yes he did. He was banged up pretty good. He was in a pickup truck. And so he—just a tough old German, I guess.

Hull: There's a picture of your father there, and you in your Naval uniform.

Jeckel: Yeah, this must have been before he was hurt, I guess.

Hull: Okay. After returning to the farm, you decided to enroll in the University of Illinois.

Jeckel: Yes.

Hull: Why did you choose the University of Illinois?

Jeckel: Well, I think because I had some friends going there. It was pretty obvious that the farm was too small for two families. There was a G.I. Bill at the time that looked pretty attractive, you know, and they paid quite a lot to—we really had it pretty good. They paid quite a lot of our expenses. And so I went. At the University, I became a member of the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity, and I know I said I was just on a fairly good-sized campus, that's just like a home away from home, you know? And I made some long-time friends and we're still very close. And we just got to do a lot of things in the fraternities, especially with sororities, social functions and that sort of thing, and I guess that's how I met Mary, my better half. And I'm always appreciative of that.

Hull: Was life at the University at that time a little bit different than it is today?

Jeckel: I think so, yes. We had a lot of those temporary buildings that were brought back from training sites, and they were erected there in some of the places. And many of the students lived there, but sure, we did some things that probably are not allowed now. But it was really a good experience.

Hull: When you graduated—and you graduated with what type of degree?

Jeckel: I'd always kind of dreamt of being a veterinarian, but it soon became apparent that my grades were not sufficient for that and it was pretty difficult to get into those schools, and so I ended up studying to be a vo-ag teacher and graduated in vocational agriculture.

Hull: And did you ever do any teaching?

Jeckel: Well, I did some practice teaching in Geneseo with a gentleman by the name of Wilbur Brokaw, and I sometimes thought back to that experiences, saying, "Well, I guess some of the classroom experiences could be more difficult than maybe life on the farm," but I never pursued that. I did have a chance to come back and farm with dad. He had added a few acres, and so that's how it all worked out.

Hull: What brought you back to the farm? So you married Mary while going to school or after you graduated?

Jeckel: Well, we were in school. I still had a semester or so to finish, and so with that G.I. Bill. And she was working at Sears and Roebuck as a merchandise person, and so we got along fairly well. I don't know that she had a big choice about where we were going to move, but the opportunity did exist here to come home and farm with father and mother, and Mary was a product of a—the daughter of a university professor. I've often said tongue in cheek that her only experience as far as agriculture was concerned was that I had took her to visit the sheep barn one time,

and that's almost the way it was. But she and my parents got along fabulously well, and that was a nice relationship.

Hull: And then you decided to come back to the farm. What precipitated most of that, your thinking on coming back to being on a farm, and what made you decide to go into swine production?

Jeckel: Well, dollars were short, and my parents had always, well, let me back up. My parents went through the Depression. They never bought anything unless they could pay for it. They saw many of their friends lose everything during the Depression—the farm. And I always had a desire to own some land, but my father would always remind me that it's too risky, we'd have to borrow the money, and so and so lost their land, and so we had to find a way to generate some dollars, and I guess I did have some interest in pork production in Illinois, working with Dr. Becker and Stan Terrell and some of those, Jake Kryder. Had just did some experiments, Purdue University, we used to spend some time at their [Purdue] swine days and that sort of thing, and so we had an opportunity or we thought an opportunity to generate dollars by not necessarily feeding out hogs but bringing animals and raising little pigs, and then selling those pigs to other producers. Because that transferred the bulk of the risk because they had to furnish the feed and we didn't.

So we did that for many years, and that's, we just took what we had. We had an old basement barn where we used to milk cows, and we converted that to a farrowing house and we would—it was kind of unusual, how many sows we could run through that little place. And then we'd take them out to the field, and we'll have some—

Hull: Yes, why don't you show that, this is—

Jeckel: It was there in that little old basement barn, and then we'd have to move them out to what we called field lots, these double A houses. And we always felt the secret of that was that each of these [little lots], I don't know, two or three sows in each of these double A houses, they all had to be separated with electric fence. The pigs could go where they wanted to, but the mothers had to stay in those pens. And of course you could just—I began to realize that it's a tremendous amount of labor to do this, but the capital requirements were low. And so that's the way we went for quite a long, quite a long time. And you always prayed that the snows were not too deep and the rain was not too heavy, you know, that sort of thing. But it really did have an effect on this outdoor operation.

You know, but it was a way to generate some dollars. When you go into the local lender, the first job that you have to do is prove that you really don't need any dollars. Of course, my dad was no help because he was so conservative. But he began to bend a little as the years went by, and so we were able to generate a few dollars and eventually we began to feed out some of these pigs out in the field.

Hull: I think they used to refer to raising pigs as the mortgage lifters.

Jeckel: Right, and that's very true.

Hull: Yeah. There's also a picture there of one of your modern buildings, just as a contrast, what?

Jeckel: Yes. This was built not too many years ago. It's a confined nursery, and we have a controlled environment, and it's pretty up to date. It's total slats, and there's several rooms in there, and it's kind of a far cry from that [field lots]. That works, but this works a lot better.

Hull: Sure. In the early fifties, an evolution occurred on how pigs were fed. The epicenter of this change occurred at the University of Illinois and was first implemented here at your farm. Discuss the revolutionary ration, if you will, that was changed, and why is it better?

Jeckel: Well, Dick, I remember that we used to make our own supplement, which was primarily to be fed with the grain, and you fed the grains separate and then you fed—the supplement consisted of tankage and alfalfa meal, these two primarily were considered, contained the unidentified growth factors, whatever they were, you know? And that's, the feed industry was pretty much locked into this, and that was a source of what was available, the current thinking at that time.

Then Dr. Becker, Gene Becker, had I guess always felt that alfalfa, of course, didn't necessarily work well with pigs. It was too bulky and that sort of thing, and so he, about that time, had access to B12, which I think was that unidentified growth factor. That could be, that was available in the crystalline form. Then he also found out—see, bean meal at that time was not very palatable, and he'd gotten that to some people that were doing some work in Germany treating bean meal with citric acid. And this is kind of technical stuff I probably shouldn't even be discussing, but anyway, it worked out that with the treatment of citric acid, the bean meal became more palatable, and he began to push or say that we could just use bean meal, corn, minerals, vitamins, grind it all together, and go as a complete ration which would help and control the amount of waste, because what the pigs ate, they got everything in one mouthful so to speak.

And I can remember one time—that was pretty controversial—and I can remember one time when we were first working in this area and began to feed this, we were invited to speak to a seminar in Kentucky. The feeling ran pretty strong that there were some fly-by-nights up here in Illinois doing things that were going to not treat their business very well, which was absolutely true, you know? So I felt a little uneasy to venture into that, but as it turned out, that's the way it happened, you know, and that was the beginning of the corn soybean meal ration which just worked wonderful, you know. And of course our farm and the Brauer Farm and the Gehlbach Farm kind of proved that yes it does work well, you know? And the feed industry gradually came around, and so it was quite a big change.

Hull: And that's been the standard ever since.

Jeckel: Yeah, right.

Hull: Yes. In the early sixties, the Illinois Pork Council was organized. You were a charter member of this organization. What was its purposes?

Jeckel: Well, Dick, we had a feeling that—there were lots of things happening in the industry, if I remember, about that time, and life is too short to make all the mistakes yourself. And I think some of us, Brauers and Gehlbachs, Perkinsons, some of those fellows thought, Well, wouldn't it be nice if we could get together and start a small group? And I remember when we first began to talk about this, we went to the university and told Harry Russell, Dick Carlyle, and some of the powers that be at the university that we were not going to start another Illinois Pork Producer Organization, but we wanted to start a self-help group that could kind of work together and develop some of these ideas that we had and things that we were doing on the farm.

And so that's the way it happened. Put together articles under corporation, and it ended up that it was limited to twenty-five members. Wonderful group. We just had meetings quite often, and I have to say we just in a sense became like brothers with hardly anything that we couldn't discuss as far as pork production was concerned, and it was one of the highlights of many of us in pork production, I think, to work with other pork producers in an area that wasn't being addressed in, say, the state organization, because it was too wide and varied and it's not that we didn't think it had a lot of merit, too. But this was kind of a special group, and we really got a lot out of it.

Hull: It kind of gave you a venue to share ideas in?

Jeckel: Yeah, oh yes, yes.

Hull: There have been many changes in swine housing over the years, and you are credited with pioneering the partial slatted floor concept as well as the use of open front buildings in confinement hog production. Why these changes? Can you discuss a little of what brought about these changes?

Jeckel: Well, I think that most of us that had had experience with outside production were very intent on taking some of the labor out of raising these pigs, and about that time I remember Farm Journal had, I can't think of his name right now, had a man go over to Europe and brought back the idea which apparently wasn't all that new but it was kind of new to us I guess, that if you would bring animals inside, the secret to make that work was to separate the animal from its waste. And so the idea of slatted floors was very important, and that proved to be kind of the missing link in bringing these pigs inside, and of course the waste would be under the slats.

And the open front building was a very simple building. It sort of worked on the principle that if it weren't too wide, the outside air and the inside air would mix and you wouldn't have to have a fan or anything like that to do this mixing for you. We sold plans, and there were quite a number of these built.

But I'm first to admit that probably the direction that the whole thing is going now is what they call a wean-to-finish building, and they move these pigs in when they're ten, eleven pounds, twelve, and then they're just finished out in that same building. They're rather wide buildings, you have mechanical fans, and controlled environment, and the waste is stored in pits or can be drained out to a lagoon, although lagoons have essentially fallen out of favor, I think, because neighborhoods aren't too fond of these, you know, when the wind blows and that sort of thing unless you've got an awful lot of capacity. So the waste being under there is accessible and you can store the bulk of the year's production in that big pit.

Hull: You've said in the past that you've always wanted to be a good neighbor, and right here at the edge of Delavan, you have, almost within the city limits, so to speak. How did you go about becoming a good neighbor?

Jeckel: Well, first off you have to adopt the concept that you better damn well listen to what the neighbors are thinking, you know? And if they want to be patted on the you know what, you do it. You know? Whether that be producing extra sweet corn which you share with them, or we always—and we still do these things—we process any number of pigs and make whole hog sausage which we give to them at Christmas time. And this has become such a tradition that if I'm a day or so late at Christmas time, some of these older people in the subdivision up here will say, "I thought you weren't coming." (laughter) That's the God's truth, you know?

So not that they don't know that we're here when the wind blows in a certain direction, but my son Scott who operates the farm now will take, he'll make sure he knows which way the wind's direction or if there's any special town event, the humidity of the air, if he has to move some waste he can do it in the far end of the farm. And of course now we inject everything. We don't spread anything on top.

So all these things, and we try to be involved in civic events, and all these things make a big difference. I'm not saying that tomorrow somebody might get on his hind legs, you know, but it's just been a nice relationship. We wouldn't build a farm here again, here, but that's just kind of where we were and what we did, and we were able to make it work.

Hull: Great. You were active in the development of the Illinois Swineherd Improvement Association. What was your function there?

Jeckel: Well, I think that it was an organization that brought pork producers together. We had common successes and we had common problems. We had to have an organization that had some dollars that could hire somebody to coordinate pork producers statewide. And that too was an area where we could share many ideas, and of course as we concentrated pigs in smaller areas, that begins to generate some problems, and if you have an organization working in this area that can be aware of some of the problems that exist out there, and so that was pretty important, I think.

Hull: Were they involved with genetic lines or anything like that?

Jeckel: Dick, I don't think so at that time, although that was an area that many of us in pork production were very interested in. Of course, we kind of had the purebred producers, the hybrid people, you know, and so we weren't necessarily going down the same road. But it was an area that there was some work being done. Most of it, of course, all the breeding was done by the boar, putting the boys and the girls together and that sort of thing, and now of course it's primarily all artificial insemination.

Hull: Yes. It's my understanding that the Illinois Swineherd Improvement Association was the forerunner of the Illinois Pork Producers' Association which you and Mary were instrumental in creating, as well as the development of the National Pork Producers' Association. You also helped to organize the Tazewell County Pork Producers and served as its President. Can you tell a little history about the creation of these organizations?

Jeckel: Well I remember, we were quite close to the Gehlbach family in Lincoln, and Albert Gehlbach had, I think, started the Logan County Pork Producers' Association in about 1947, and it just seemed logical and we ought not feel that we had to travel to Logan County every time they would meet, and so we started our own local pork producer, Tazewell County. I shall never forget, one time, one of the initial meetings, that we met in Minier and Minier right next to the restaurant had a theater, and we met in the theater and we had—and I can't think of the guy's name but he was a rabid, you know, if you deviated from pork production—but anyway, we served chicken that night, and I shall never forget being raked over the coals because we really did a terrible thing by serving chicken. (laughter) And I don't know that you would—I can't remember the guys' name that agreed with this, but that was one of the things that I kind of remember.

Hull: You once said that sound business growth in pork production should be based on evolution rather than revolution. What'd you mean by that statement?

Jeckel: Well, I think that often times we can get in less trouble if we're willing to take a little time and grow in the business. There's always a price for admission, and I've been reminded of that so many times. Just take your time, don't get in too big a hurry, and you'll be a lot better off. And I think that said in another way is that same thing, said in another way, is just take time and let the thing kind of develop, pick up as many ideas that you can, and you'll be a lot better off.

Hull: I have a picture here of you and Mary depicting the Fighting Illini Pork Club. What's the function of this group?

Jeckel: We were never really active. Colleen Callahan, that name probably means something to you.

Hull: Sure.

Jeckel: Colleen was very active in that organization. It was, primarily dealt with athletics at the University of Illinois, and ticket sales, and would oftentimes invite some of the

participants of the football team or the basketball team to these meetings and talk to us. And so there were some membership fees that I think ended up in the Athletic Association funds, and that was basically—still, still going. It has some very good meetings.

Hull: Was that the same group that cooked the pork chops at the games?

Jeckel: Not necessarily. It could be. I don't know if they had a membership big enough to handle that or not, but I think rather maybe the State Association was maybe more involved than this smaller organization.

Hull: I see, sure. I have another picture here with you presenting Governor Otto Kerner with a ham. What was that ceremony about?

Jeckel: Well, you know, I don't remember very much about this. But I think that was a prize ham, and I don't know whether that was selected at the state fair or whatever, but I think that was to indicate that we were trying to get in the good graces of the powers that be, and so we gave him a ham.

Hull: I see. Getting out your crystal ball, what new problems and challenges do you see in the confinement producer today?

Jeckel: Well, Dick, we ran into—personal experience—we ran into one of those things in the late eighties when the prices fell out of bed, you know? And where a ham in the grocery store wouldn’t even buy a pig on the farm, you know, and that gets to you pretty quick. So you know, in one sense you were encouraged and every indication said that you could just raise any number of pigs, but at some point if the economics aren't right, then things can kind of go astray pretty fast.

So I think that there are—you know, in the old days, you couldn't get enough money to get in trouble. But when you got so big, where the lender says, "Well," he would kind of encourage you, and so dollars were available and we probably overextended ourselves. So I think that's one thing that we have to be a little concerned about. Another, of course, is operations that get so big and use maybe outside ways of getting rid of waste and that can have a way of affecting neighbors and gives kind of a bad name to the industry. There must be others, but I can't think of those right now.

Hull: Okay, good. Let's get Mary in here now.

Jeckel: Okay. Mary? Can you come?

Hull: How's our time?

M: I’ll stop tape.

(pause in recording)

M: And please clap your hands for me one time. And begin.

Hull: We now have Mary with us. She is part of this Jeckel Pork Organization. She's been the, what? Secretary and—

Mary: Treasurer, if you want to call it.

Hull: There you go.

Russ: Office manager.

Mary: Office manager, right.

Hull: Yes. I think that Russ has said that you're the best thing he brought back from the University of Illinois.

Mary: Well, I think that's a compliment.

Hull: Yes, it very much is.

Mary: Three things I categorize it. I never said it. The second one was the friends I made. The third was a degree. Not everybody would agree with that, but I, in their own situation, but that was mine. And I really believe that.

Hull: And how long have you been married?

Mary: Soon, we're going to celebrate fifty-nine years. Can't believe it.

Hull: Wonderful.

Russ: Fifty-nine.

Mary: Yes.

Hull: You served as President of the Tazewell County Porkettes.

Mary: Right.

Hull: As well as charter member of the Illinois Porkettes, and as President of the National Porkettes from 1966 to 1968. What are the Porkettes?

Mary: Well, the Porkettes were, in most cases, were wives of members of the—in the beginning—the Swineherd Association, before it became the National Pork Producers' Council. And actually, we were starting to promote pork and pork products. That was the goal at that time, and we were a separate organization started in 1963, but then, I can't tell you, maybe in 1972, became part of the National Pork Producers' Council.

Hull: And is this still in existence? Are you still in the Porkettes?

Mary: Yeah. Well, you know, I can't answer that. I don't think so. I think we kind of all got together and decided that there was no reason to have two organizations. I'm sorry, I can't answer that.

Hull: There are many things that you folks have been involved with during your span here at the farm, but what would you say your biggest contribution to Illinois' farm industry has been?

Russ: Well, I think the association and friendship of many fellow pork producers is so important. I've often said that many of these friends are close enough that, you know, if I were having a personal problem, I could almost—I could pick up the telephone, call them up, and talk it over with them. And I think that that's a real plus, you know. We had a lot of common interest, a lot of common goals. I think if I could sum this up, we had so many exchange students over the years, and one of these exchange students was a Polish boy, a Marion Koplon. He came to visit us. I forget what year.

Mary: I'm not sure.

Russ: But anyway, we were up north at the lake, and Marion was one of these very muscular fellows, not too tall. And he would take off across this big lake just like it was his own backyard pool, you know? (laughter) But Marion was here doing some work with computer work and getting files together for breed associations. Anyway, we had occasion to go to their home in—what year was it, honey?

Mary: Probably four years ago.

Russ: In Krakow. And we were sitting there one night and he looked Mary and I straight in the eye, and this kind of touches me because he said, "You changed my life."

Hull: Wonderful, wonderful.

Russ: So I guess I could say that many of these friends did the same thing, you know?

Hull: Yes, yes.

Russ: And anyway, when it's all said and done, that's kind of what it's all about, isn't it.

Hull: That's right, very much so.

Russ: We had a lot of young college people, too, come; in fact, one of the young men that came is now our son-in-law.

Hull: Wonderful. That's good.

Russ: I don't know if that answers your question about the effect on the industry.

Hull: Yes, I think it does.

Russ: But I think it does, too.

Hull: Yeah. Why don't we take a look and see what the operation looks like outside?

Mary: Okay.

Russ: Very good.

(end of interview)