Interview with Chris Eckert

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, July 31st, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I am the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here with Chris Eckert today. Welcome Chris.

Eckert: Thank you.

DePue: And we're here to talk about your experiences, Chris, in the family farm operation, but I think that's probably a misnomer of how you would want to describe the operation that you have. So how would you describe? What would you use as the terms to describe that?

Eckert: It's a unique collection of different enterprises, but farming is our core and that's what we were bred from, but today we expand into retail, food service and entertainment.

DePue: Eckert Orchards, Eckert, Incorporated; goes by both?

Eckert: There's actually three different companies. There's Eckert, Incorporated, Eckert Orchards, Incorporated, and Eckert Land Company. So it's a conglomeration of different entities that works together for different reasons.

DePue: Okay, well we're going to take a big step back in time, though. Tell us when and where you were born.

Eckert: I was born in Belleville in 1972, May 18, and I grew up in the town of Millstadt, Illinois, which is about fifteen miles west of here.

DePue: And your parents, your father?

Eckert: My dad is Lary Eckert, and that's spelled with one R.

DePue: L-a-r-y.

Eckert: Yes and my mom is Judy. Her maiden name was Lanart. She grew up in the town of Freeburg. My dad grew up in this home. This was my grandma and grandpa's house. Now my wife and my family live here and they met in grade school because he went to Freeburg Grade School and then went to Belleville High School, but they reunited their senior year in high school and I guess the rest is history.

DePue: Well let's take a big step back in history because I know that you are the seventh generation on this operation, this piece of land. So let's start at the beginning, if you can.

Eckert: Okay. My family immigrated to the United States from Germany and right outside of Frankfurt, Germany. The town was Dietzenbach, Germany, where they originated and this is kind of a German community. In that timeframe there were a lot of Germans coming to this area. The soil and the climate is similar to that part of Germany and they were all farmers. They came here and found it kind of familiar and knew how to work the soil and be successful.

DePue: That was in what year?

Eckert: Eighteen thirty-seven; Johann Eckert immigrated from Germany and settled in a piece of property outside of the town of St. Libory, Illinois, which is about fifteen miles east of here. That town was not much of a town at that point in time and he was really out in the country and he, in fact, sectioned off a portion of his original farm and created the town of Darmstadt, Illinois, which is still there today. So if you go to Darmstadt, Illinois, that was the original Eckert Farm. Darmstadt today is probably a town of only 300 people, but it is still there and thriving as it ever has.

DePue: Why didn't he call it Eckert, Illinois?

Eckert: Well I guess the story that I had on it is there were two gentlemen in that area and one was from Darmstadt, Germany and the other, my ancestor, Johann Eckert, was from Dietzenback, Germany. Well Dietzenback was too hard to pronounce, so they decided to call it Darmstadt and that's how the story went.

DePue: What was it about the soil and the weather conditions, the growing conditions here in this part of Illinois that appealed to them?

Eckert: Well specifically I can't answer the question, but what I would say is climate-wise there's a lot of similarities between here and Germany, maybe a little bit warmer here, but rolling hills and at that time there was good access to this part of the country because of the river. When you got west of here there was very limited access and even inland it was harder access because most people came in on riverboat and then had to take horseback to get to whatever settlement they were going to at that time. So that's how they ended up here. They came by river to St. Louis and then went by horseback out to the St. Libory area.

DePue: And how far would this area be from St. Louis?

Eckert: We are about fifteen miles east of St. Louis.

DePue: So a day's ride for them?

Eckert: It was about a day's ride to here and then another fifteen miles further east from here. So it was probably two days' ride to actually get to the section of the country where they settled.

DePue: The country where they settled, is it a little bit richer, loamy soil than it is here?

Eckert: Pretty similar to here; maybe not quite as hilly as this, but soil types are similar.

DePue: Do you know what kind of agriculture they were pursuing back in Germany?

Eckert: It was a typical farm of that time. It was primarily livestock and grain, of course soybeans weren't the thing back then. It was wheat and rye and corn, but livestock was a big part of it and as on many farms in that time, they had a small orchard and it was not the mainstay of their business, but it was a portion of producing food for the family.

DePue: And this would have been back in Germany we're talking about?

Eckert: Germany and here.

DePue: From what you just described, it didn't take them long to decide to plant a few trees at least.

Eckert: It was very commonplace. It was primarily just to supply the fruit cellar of the home that you would have some fruit production on the farm.

DePue: Well here's the tough part of the interview for you, probably. That's the first generation, 1837. Can you take us up generation by generation? And I'm especially interested in how the use of the land and maybe the location and the procurement of the land has evolved over time.

Eckert: I can walk you through it explicitly.

DePue: Okay.

Eckert: Johann Eckert settled outside of St. Libory in what is now Darmstadt, Illinois. He had a son, Michael Eckert, and as was the case in those days, he bought farms and gave each of his sons a different farm. I'm only going to explain about Michael Eckert because that was where I descended from. Michael Eckert was given a farm on a piece of property just outside of the town of Fayetteville and that farm was called Drum Hill Farm and we still own and operate that farm today. Michael took ownership of that farm in the 1840s and he built a home on that farm in 1855 and that home still is there today. Michael had a son by the name of Henry Eckert. Henry Eckert was a farmer as well and he moved to this farm here in Belleville and married

Mary Miller. This was a Miller Farm. This was where her parents lived and farmed and they got married and Mary's parents gave them the farm here at Belleville.

DePue: How many acres? Any idea?

Eckert: Well at that time I believe it was about 100 acres that was given to Henry and Mary.

DePue: And at that day and age, that's a lot of land.

Eckert: Yes, that was a good-sized farming operation at that time. Henry had a son named Alvin and Alvin continued the farming operation and moved into the same home as Henry built right here on this farm. At that time they also bought some more ground. They bought the hundred acres on this side of Green Mount Road, which was also a Miller Farm, but it was another ancestor, not Mary's parents. It was an uncle.

DePue: What were the Millers doing with the land?

Eckert: They were farming. This was a grain and livestock farm and it wasn't really until Henry came along that we really expanded into more fruit production. Henry enjoyed fruit production and planted more acres. Alvin Eckert, Henry's son, was really the entrepreneur. He had all kinds of ideas about things he wanted to try and he expanded into the direct farm marketing, more fruit production, more vegetable production and also had a little bit of that entertainment blood in his system too because he actually had a Wild West Rodeo Show that he and another partner put together and they traveled all over the Western part of the United States doing Wild West Shows. The story goes that they went bankrupt out somewhere. They ran out of money and they couldn't get home and they had to wire back to grandma to get cash to get them back to Belleville so they could get home.

DePue: That would have been his mother you mean?

Eckert: No, that would have been his wife. It was Alvin's wife. Alvin's wife, her name was Ella and she was a stickler. She was a tough nut, so I'm sure he had a lot to answer to when he got home after that trip.

DePue: Ella Heinrich is what I believe. That was her maiden name?

Eckert: Ella Heinrich.

DePue: Well these are all good German names.

Eckert: (Laughs) Yes, the interesting thing is that I'm the seventh generation in my family to be here and I'm pretty much 100 percent German bloodline still. So that kind of gives you an idea the depth of German heritage that exists in this area right here.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit more about Alvin and Ella? This sounds like quite a couple.

Eckert: They were an interesting couple. I only have faint memories of Ella. I never met Alvin. He died long before I was born, but Alvin, as I said, was a real entrepreneur and a real promoter and he really kind of expanded into the retail business and saw a lot of opportunity in getting more margin for the crops you produce being able to sell directly to the consumer. So at that time you saw us expand a lot more into diversified group of fruits and vegetables so that he could expand his farm marketing operation.

DePue: When you say farm marketing, did he have a roadside stand or did he sell the grocery stores around the area or what?

Eckert: It was a roadside stand. It was Alvin O. Eckert brand farm. I'm trying to remember this. I think it was Alvin O. Eckert Turkey Hill Brand is what the sign said on the storefront and we have some pictures of that we can share with you.

DePue: Now there is a building right down by your current restaurant and your operation called Turkey hill, right?

Eckert: That is a Turkey Hill Grange of which my family is longtime supporter of the grange and grange actually started out as a farm family fraternity. It was more like a farmer's union that did some lobbying to support farmers around the country and this particular grange right here is still very active and very strong. A lot of the granges have since gone out of existence, but Turkey Hill has remained very successful. Oops. I didn't see that phone. I can't really move. My wife might be coming up to get it. That's her cell phone.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit more about Ella? This would be your great-grandmother?

Eckert: This is my great-grandmother. Ella Eckert was—I don't have more than just faint memories of her in her very last years on this planet—but she was a stickler and was very tough and she really drove a lot of the kids to working and working tough. So there's a lot of good stories about her and her work ethic and her drive and her insistence upon doing things well and the old saying that my grandmother always had about Ella was that anything worth doing is worth doing well and that was really a motto by which the whole family lived by through her generation and I think still today. It's really about committing yourself to doing things at a level that other people aren't willing to.

DePue: From what you've said, it sounds like Ella was the structured, rounded one and Alvin was the adventurous spirit in the family?

Eckert: That's right. I think that's a very accurate description of the family.

DePue: And after Alvin, what comes along?

Eckert: Alvin had three sons. Alvin and Ella had three sons and they were also very committed to education. All three of the sons went to the University of Illinois and got degrees in agriculture, which is somewhat unique for that time in the twenties for farm families to send all the children to university to study agriculture. They all went

off and after college they all came back and started working in the farming operation. Of course that brought a lot more resource back to the business and allowed for a lot of growth at that time.

DePue: But the farm was not subdivided among the various sons? And apparently that wasn't the case for a few generations.

Eckert: Right. Along the way, Henry Eckert had another son, Eugene, who did take another farm and farm it down in a different location, but Alvin stayed here and farmed the home farm. Alvin, when his sons came back into the business, created a partnership with his sons, Alvin O. Eckert and Sons Orchards. They all shared the ownership of the business and the responsibilities of business and it grew very rapidly at that time. That was right around the era of the Great Depression, which actually was a very prosperous time for our farming operation. Some farms really suffered at that time, but other farms that weren't really affected by the Dust Bowl did prosper through some of those years.

DePue: You said it grew. Did it grow in size or just the diversity and the prosperity of the farm?

Eckert: It grew primarily in size and the thirties was really a growth stage in terms of adding acres and new farms to the mix. So in the 1930s, we purchased a farm in Millstadt, Illinois, that we still own today. We purchased a farm about two miles east of here and we purchased two other locations about ten miles east of here, all in a period of about ten years. So we've about tripled our acreage in a ten-year's timeframe through the thirties.

DePue: Well I know that throughout the entire 1920s and especially into the thirties, those were tough economic times, especially on the farm. In the twenties, the rest of the society was doing very well, but farming had been depressed ever since World War I. So what was it about what Alvin was doing with his property that was so different from what the rest of the farmers of the area were doing?

Eckert: Primarily, I think it was the direct farm marketing. Being able to produce crops that you sell directly to consumers allowed us to take advantage of those margins that existed for retailers, but not for farmers in that timeframe. At the same time, once you got into the depression, the farm economy did rebound more quickly than some of the other economies. So we were not necessarily in the grain business so much as more the livestock and the fruit and vegetable business, which allowed us to have higher value crops that were also marketed directly to the public, so it was kind of a double win for them at that time. They were really able to profit.

DePue: Were some of these other farms that he was acquiring then the traditional livestock and grain farms that were then being converted into other uses?

Eckert: Yes. We were buying what were livestock and grain farms and planting fruit trees on them. We did have a large livestock operation at the same time. We were raising hogs and cattle and chickens that were all being raised to be sold in our own retail. So we

had a slaughterhouse and we're slaughtering our own animals and selling fresh meat at the meat counter at the roadside market and also fresh eggs. So it was a totally integrated operation that allows you to capitalize on all of the added value of the crops.

DePue: Well with all of these things that you're producing, though, it sounds like somewhere along the line you grew beyond the roadside stand.

Eckert: (Laughs) Through the forties and the fifties, the market, the roadside stand, really became more a market and then became a grocery store. There was a lot of traffic going by our stand and we were somewhat unique to have a grocery store out in a more rural setting that the farm community could really depend upon. It was something that worked for us and it was also a time when the independent grocer was really doing well. That went on for quite some time, but then when you got to the seventies and the eighties when you saw a lot of consolidation in the grocery industry and the independent grocer really went out of business is when we, again, changed our format into a more season farm market or country store that focused on the seasons of crops that we produce and really trying to capitalize on large volume in a shorter season.

DePue: And was it the seventies and eighties that you started to rely more heavily on the St. Louis Market explicitly?

Eckert: I would say the St. Louis Market has been a part of our marketing strategy every since we opened. There's been more population around here because we're close to St. Louis and more traffic because we're close to St. Louis. So it's always benefited us.

DePue: Alvin and Ella had three sons and which side of those three sons should we be paying attention to here?

Eckert: Well all three of them were active, integral parts of our business, but my grandfather was Curt Eckert and Curt married Ruth Staab and they had three children also. Curt and Ruth lived here on the Belleville Farm and built this home right here. There's actually another home that was here prior to this that was a Miller home that they moved into. They were living there for some years. I don't know. I can't remember how many, but probably fifteen years, ten or fifteen years, and while they were out of town on a trip lightening struck the house and the house burned to the ground and the story goes that since we're on top of this big hill here, everybody in the community saw the fire starting and everyone came up here and saw that there was no one home and took everything out of the house and put it in the yard and nothing was lost in the fire. All of the furniture was saved, all of the keepsakes were saved and the house was totally lost.

DePue: It's hard to see something like that happening today.

Eckert: (Laughs) And having the furniture in your yard and not in somebody else's house.

DePue: But I'm thinking also that Alvin and Ella have three sons, they all have children. So there's a lot of cousins and there are a lot of ways that this business could have been divided and yet it wasn't divided.

Eckert: Well what happened, the three brothers, Curt, Cornell, and Vernon—those are Alvin's sons—they formed a corporation and all of the assets of the business were held in the corporation.

DePue: What year would that have been?

Eckert: That was in the fifties, sixties era when the corporations were formed. They passed those shares of ownership onto their children. Curt had three, Vernon had three, and Cornell had none. So all of those assets were then passed on to the next generation, which would be my parents' generation as shares of stock in the business. So what you see is there's a much larger group of ownership today of the business and all of the shareholders seem to be pretty excited to be a participants in the business at this point in time and nobody's willing to sell any shares. So I think the offer was always out there if somebody would want to cash out of the business that we're obligated to do that and would be happy to offer them a buyout of their stock, but nobody has pursued that at this point in time and as a result, we're pretty fortunate. The business has been allowed to flourish and grow and not have to liquidate any assets to buy back stock or anything like that and we have put plans in place for the future generations so that operations can be consolidated into the hands of the people who are running the business and maintain the focus of the business and the people who are operating it and feel like they know best what to do with the business.

DePue: Curt's your grandfather?

Eckert: Yes.

DePue: And your father's name, again, is Lary?

Eckert: Lary.

DePue: And was it important to the family to continue that tradition that apparently Alvin had established, that the sons go off to school and get a good education?

Eckert: Absolutely and we all have attended college and the University of Illinois. We are all graduates of the University of Illinois. There's been, I believe, thirteen Eckerts go to the University of Illinois and get degrees.

DePue: What kind of degrees have those thirteen gotten?

Eckert: Well various degrees. As the generations go by, they get a little more dispersed, but my degree is in agricultural economics. My wife's degree is from University of Illinois. She wasn't an Eckert then, but is an Eckert now. So she passed the test. Her degree is in ornamental horticulture from the College of ACES at the University of Illinois. My sister has a degree in communication from the University of Illinois. So

it's not in the College of Aces, but liberal arts, and my other sister has got an education degree, primary education degree, from the University of Illinois. While a lot of us stayed the course on agriculture, we are getting more dispersed in our academic profession.

DePue: Well I want to spend a little bit of time talking about you and what it was like growing up in this big family and a big family business as well. Tell us a little bit about the chores you had.

Eckert: Well I grew up on our Millstadt Farm and it's strictly an apple farm. That's the only crop we produced there. So I didn't have a lot of farm chores growing up. I didn't have to collect eggs and milk the cows or anything like that, but once we were old enough, we were brought to Belleville to work in the business here and our first job—all of us—our first job was folding pans for the peach line and pans, we have a cardboard box. It's a two port pan and they have to be folded and it's been the same box for I think 150 years, but it seems like that's every young Eckert's responsibility is to start out folding pans. You get paid a penny a pan and you see how many you can fold in a day. So that was always the first job and then it goes from there, but we all worked many hours in the business, especially through the summer, mostly in the country store here helping out with selling peaches and produce and bakery.

DePue: Was there any one of the three brothers at that time who seemed to have a bigger role in the operation, more in charge of things?

Eckert: It was, I would say, pretty evenly split. They all had their areas of responsibility that they enjoyed. My grandfather was really responsible at that time for the livestock operation and also for kind of the financial management of the business. Vernon Eckert was responsible for the retail end of the business. Cornell Eckert was responsible for the horticulture end of the business. So they kind of shared some responsibilities, but each had their individual passions that they pursued.

DePue: Does that mean that by the fifties and sixties there was also a nursery or a garden store along with this?

Eckert: That really didn't get start up until the seventies as part of the country store model of the retail business.

DePue: Well I want to talk a little bit more in detail, so I don't want to go there too far right now. What were family gatherings like for the Eckerts?

Eckert: Our family's steeped in traditions and we always celebrated Christmas Eve in this home. My grandmother had Christmas Eve. That was just the bottom line and up until the year before she passed away, we would celebrate Christmas Eve in this house and that's some of my fondest memories of family gatherings. One of the things that we always did on Christmas Eve was all of the kids would get together and we'd write a skit. We always did skits that made fun of the parents and we would perform them right here in this room and all of the parents would sit around and get a big kick out of us making fun of them and we had a lot of fun. Then you always had the whole

anxiety of we've got to write this dumb skit. What are we doing? We had a blast doing it. It was always such fond memories of that. My cousins and myself, we always joke about that still today and we're about ready to start that tradition back up because the next generation is getting to the age where they can start to do it again. But then we have other traditions too. We always celebrated Easter at Uncle Cornell's house and we always celebrated Thanksgiving at my parents' house. So we had areas where we all had to go to and we all ate dinner together. It didn't matter what kind of problems we were having with the business that year, what disagreements you might have had about a decision, you always sat down at the dinner table together.

DePue: Where along your youth did you decide that you wanted to follow in with the family business or was there even ever a choice about that?

Eckert: Oh there's always a choice and in fact it's a rule in our business that you cannot come back and work for the family business after you've graduated college. To be back in the business you have to have a college degree and you have to have at least two years of professional experience outside of the business for two reasons. One, if you're coming back here, they want to make sure that you're ready for it and that you're committed to it and for two, if you do come back here, they want you to bring some experience. We want you to come in and bring some new perspective because we don't get a lot of new senior management in this family business. So when you get somebody, you want to make sure they bring new blood to the table. So from a very young age—ever since I can remember—have loved the farm and loved what we do and I can remember I had my toy tractors in the sandbox and I played pick your own. I had the wagons and we were loading people up and picking apples in the backyard. So I've always had a passion for what we do and it was never a problem getting me to be involved in the farm. It was always a problem keeping me at home when I was too young to be on the farm. So I've always had a passion for it and I've always loved being in it.

DePue: Ever had a doubt of where you'd be going to college?

Eckert: No. I have always wanted—that's the only college I knew. Is there another one? So I've always been very proud of my academic years at University of Illinois and what the university does, I think it's a great testament to the quality of agriculture in our state.

DePue: What class did you graduate from?

Eckert: I graduated in ninety-four from College of Aces. At that time it was the College of Agriculture.

DePue: And why agriculture economics for you?

Eckert: Well the University of Illinois doesn't have a lot of depth when it comes to fruit production. I mean let's face it. Illinois's not known for thousands and thousands of acres of fruit production, so I took all the fruit production classes that were offered, but what's really probably more important to our success, long term, is having a good

financial sense about how the business is run and I really had more keen interest in the financial coursework than going more into agronomy or crop sciences.

DePue: You said it's part of the tradition that you spend two years doing something else before you come back to farm. You graduated in 1994. Did you have the intent in 1994 to return to this business?

Eckert: Well I knew the rules, so I knew I was going to have to go somewhere else for a period of time, but my intent was long term to be back here.

DePue: So what were the two years that you spent?

Eckert: I had a great time. I spent a year living in Boston and I worked for a supermarket chain out there called Shaw's Supermarkets and it happened, at the time, that the CEO of Shaw's Supermarket was a graduate from the College of Agriculture at University of Illinois as well and Dean Olsen, who I've got the utmost admiration for, got me an interview with Shaw's Supermarkets through his contact at Shaw's and I got on as a buyer, a corporate buyer, of apples. I was buying apples for all of their stores. I had a great time there at it was a wonderful learning experience for me and I enjoyed it very much. I got married a year after college and my wife—

DePue: Where did you meet your wife?

Eckert: Angie and I met in high school and Angie lived in Belleville and we went to Belleville West High School together.

DePue: And her maiden name?

Eckert: Boeker. It's B-o-e-k-e-r and Angie and I met in civics class freshman year and we had civics and honors algebra together freshman year. I remember she didn't like me. She thought I was arrogant, cocky and a cocky football player, but we ended up starting to date our senior year in high school and dated in college. We both went to University of Illinois. Her first job was working at Eckert's County Store in the bakery counter.

DePue: Was it just a fluke that both of you end up at University of Illinois?

Eckert: Both of her parents are U of I graduates as well, so we got a lot of legacy there and she was interested in plants as well and biology and it was kind of just over a course of a year at the University of Illinois that she kind of figured out that he wanted to be in ornamental horticulture. So when she got out of college, she had an internship at—I can't remember the name—she had an internship out in Philadelphia at a garden out there. I'm blanking out. I can't remember the name of it right now.

DePue: No problem.

Eckert: But then she was wanting to go to graduate school and so right before we got married, she got a full ride scholarship to go to Ohio State to get her master's degree in agricultural education. So I ended up leaving my job in Boston and we both moved to

Columbus, Ohio, and I took another job as a production manager for a company called Custom Cuts. It's not the haircut place. It's the place where you make salad mixes for restaurants, like you see in the store all the salad mixes that they sell. We would chop up heads of lettuce and heads of cabbage and send them off to the restaurants for them to make salads with. So I was there for a year and then we ended up moving back here and I worked in the farming operations.

DePue: Does that mean your wife had one year of graduate school there in Ohio or more?

Eckert: Angie was at Ohio State for a year and a half and she completed her—should we wait until?

DePue: No, that's okay.

Eckert: Angie was at Ohio State for a year and a half. She completed her master's degree in a year and a half. I moved home, actually, six months before she was finished. I moved home in July and she finished up in December and we had a farm at that time in Bonne Terre, Missouri and we had made the decision to not replant that orchard and sell off the farm and before we had the crop harvested, the farm manager decided he was going to find another job and found it and left. So we were kind of left with this farm that needed to be closed down and they asked me if I wanted to come home and do that and then start working fulltime because they knew I was interested in moving back and working here.

DePue: You had a farm in Missouri that you had purchase or that you were renting or what?

Eckert: We had a farm in Missouri that we had purchased back in the seventies and had a pick your own apple orchard down there for a long time.

DePue: We being the family, obviously.

Eckert: Yes, the Eckerts, the family. A lifespan of an apple tree is about twenty years. Well at the end of the lifespan of that orchard, the decision was made that it wasn't worth investing in replanting it. It kind of had run its course and they were going to sell the farm off. So I came back and help closed that down and auction off the equipment and get everything shut down and closed up and then I came back here to Belleville and started working in the farming operation here.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that the family called you back to work for them or were you constantly inquiring, "Hey, when can I come back?"

Eckert: No, it was really kind of a fluke timing issue. The company that I had worked for in Columbus was struggling, not doing too well and I was saying, "All right, I'm going to have to make a move here because this is not a long term solution with this organization." At the same time it was happening with our farming operation here that they were going to need somebody. So it was just kind of mutual. It wasn't like a long time, premeditated decision. It was just kind of happenstance that it worked out.

DePue: Okay. What I'd like to do next then, for the next series of questions is get a sense of how the business has grown over time as well and we established that it was about, I think you said 1910, that the roadside stand started. About what time would it have been that that turned into what we would consider a normal grocery operation?

Eckert: Well in 1910 our roadside stand was actually in a different location. It was a mile up the road here and in 1929, we actually built the roadside stand that we have here in Belleville along Highway 15. It was a traditional roadside market and had fresh fruits and vegetables and then probably in the thirties we added a meat counter to that store and then over time we added another wing to it and that became a little bit bigger produce department and probably about 1945 or so it became a grocery store.

DePue: When did the pick your own operation begin?

Eckert: The first pick your own operation opened in 1965 up in Grafton. That was our first pick your own farm. We bought that farm in the thirties and it was a strictly a wholesale apple production farm and then we decided to go into the pick your own business at that location just because we felt it was an easy way to get our feet wet with the business. Once we saw it working up there, we expanded it into our Millstadt Farm and also out into Freeburg. We had an apple orchard out in Freeburg. So we had three pick your own apple orchards.

DePue: How large was each one of these?

Eckert: Each one of them was pretty large, I mean probably in the neighborhood of 75 to 125 acres of apples, pretty large apple production farms.

DePue: Is it typical that if you have a hundred acres of land that you'd have ninety to ninety-five acres or a hundred acres of apple trees as well?

Eckert: It depends on the property. It depends on the soil conditions, if you have wet spots or wooded areas or things like that, but most of the farms at that point in time were large apple orchards.

DePue: Apples, but not peaches at that time.

Eckert: Not so much peaches. Peaches were a part of the operation, but not a big part. We were really much bigger apple growers through the forties and the fifties and then especially in the sixties and seventies, we really expanded into a lot of apple acreage. At our peak, which was in the seventies, we were growing close to 700 acres of apples and most of that was being produced for wholesale. We had two packinghouses. We had a packinghouse in Carbondale, Illinois, and we had a whole operation down there of about 400 acres of apple orchards and different operations there. That was really expanded into in the mid-fifties to mid-sixties. We made two purchases of other farms in the Carbondale-Cobden area.

DePue: Was there something particular about the soil and the conditions here that it made it more conducive for apple versus the huge grain operation we'd see farther east?

Eckert: What you'd find is that the soil here is not as productive for grain as it is in central Illinois. So while you might get production of 200 to 220 bushels an acre in central Illinois today, in this area you might get 150 bushels to the acre. So you're getting quite a bit more productivity in corn in central Illinois than you would in this area. You also see more hills in this area, which is better for fruit production. So apples and peaches are going to grow better in this type of ground than they would in Champagne County. They don't like that flat loamy stuff because it can get too wet and make the trees have wet feet or wet roots and not thrive in the soil.

DePue: Is that why rolling hills is better for orchards?

Eckert: Yes. More well drained soils. Additionally, what you really want to have is higher elevation because the other enemy in fruit production is frost. When you're in bloom you can get frost damage and when you're up on top of the hill, it's going to be warmer than in the valleys. So anytime you've been on the calm summer night and you had your hand outside the window of a car and you drive down the hill you notice it gets cooler as you go down and warmer as you come up. Well that's air separation and warmer air is always going to rise and colder air is going to settle. So you'll notice even if you look at our farms today, the apple orchards or peach orchards don't go all the way to the bottom of the hill. They start on the upslope of the hill and go over the top of the hill.

DePue: You mentioned when you were really in the peak production phase of the family operation in doing apples that it was primarily wholesale market. Does that mean you were marketing to a much wider area?

Eckert: Yes. When we were growing lots of acres of apples, we were a regional producer. So we were shipping apples to Indiana and Ohio and Tennessee and Texas and Michigan and Wisconsin and Missouri, anywhere we could find markets for large volumes of fruit. That became really unprofitable for us because we had such an influx of added acreage on the West Coast, primarily Washington State. When the freeway system really got developed and going and transportation with refrigerated trailers became much more affordable, you saw all of this fruit coming in from the West Coast that was grown in an arid climate that was more conducive for higher quality finishes on apples and so supermarkets said, "Well we can buy this fruit that's better looking from the West Coast and not have to worry about your apples anymore." So suddenly Illinois apples became less desirable and less profitable to produce.

DePue: Did that cause a lot of concern, angst, in the family then?

Eckert: Well yes and there's always angst and concern. There's always the new threat. So that's not something that's new or is not something that will go away anytime soon. I think anytime you're in your own business, you have to change with the times and that's one of the exciting things about being in our business and one of the reasons we've been successful is because we're not scared of diversifying, we're not scared of trying things a lot of times, that has allowed us to succeed over time.

DePue: So discuss, if you could, the evolution from apples to peaches or maybe there was something in between there as well.

Eckert: What we found was we could be very successful growing apples for the pick your own and direct market business. That's still a very vibrant and successful part of our business and will continue to be for the foreseeable future, but you only need about 100 to 150 acres of apples to do that. We had a lot bigger farming footprint than 150 acres. We were farming a thousand acres at that time. So we were looking for things that we could do with the property to generate profitable income and at the same time, we were coming off kind of a cold weather pattern into a warmer weather pattern and if you look back, we've got crop production records back into 1940 and people talk a lot today about global warming, but if you look at our production history, there was a period from 1940 to 1970 that was pretty warm and we were pretty successful with peach crops for a thirty year stretch. We only had two peach crop losses in that thirty-year stretch. From 1970 to 1990, we had about eight peach crop failures. So it was a real disaster for peaches in that twenty-year period, but what happened is we also had to get out of the apple business. We had too many acres of apples. We sold off some ground. All of our ground in Carbondale and the Cobden area we sold off and got out of that production region, but we still had a lot of acres of farms in this area and we thought, well maybe we can plant peaches around here on better sites and get us a little bit better productivity, so even in years when we have light crops, we still have enough peaches to sell in our store. So we added about fifty acres of peaches to our normal production and what happened is we started getting warmer. The temperatures started going up and we had fewer freeze outs and suddenly we found ourselves with excess peach production every year and realized we needed to get into the peach wholesale business. So we, at the same time, decided let's plant some more acres. So we've gone from about a hundred acres in peach production in 1990 up to about 220 acres of peach production today and we've also gone from not wholesaling peaches at all to today we're wholesaling 75 percent of our crop and it's a very successful and profitable crop for us to wholesale.

DePue: Are there any other crops currently that you're wholesaling?

Eckert: No. Peaches are the only crop.

DePue: And you already mentioned that peaches is a little bit riskier in terms of the weather. What's it been like for the last fifteen, twenty years?

Eckert: Well since 1990 we've lost two peach crops. One was in 1996 and one was last year. So we're in a pretty good cycle of not losing too man crops. In addition to that, we've had the added benefit of crop insurance for apples and peaches, which really takes the downside risk out of it. It's still, when you lose a crop like we did last year, you're going to lose money, but you don't have to sell the farm to make up for the lost crop. Without crop insurance, you're in a real financial disaster.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit more about the crop insurance? Is this commercial or is it government backed? A combination of both?

Eckert: It's a combination of both. It's government backed crop insurance and the policies are written by the U.S.D.A., but they're carried by national crop insurance companies. The U.S. government subsidizes the premiums on the policy. So that's the only way it really makes it affordable, but it's still a very expensive policy for us to carry, but it does take a lot of the risk away for us.

DePue: When you say you lost a crop, does that mean that you only harvested maybe 50 percent of the previous year or is this like a dramatic loss? You lost everything.

Eckert: When I say we lost a crop it means we had 2 percent of a peach crop last year. So it's basically an entire loss and in our apple crop we only had about 15 percent of our apple crop. So last year was a rare exception to the rule. We've only had a situation like that one other time in our family's history and that was in 1955.

DePue: Is this something that's different for somebody who's doing the specialty crops, the specialty orchards versus somebody who's in grain and the livestock operation?

Eckert: The crop insurance programs are very similar. They deal with crops in the same way in terms of annual production averages and how they look at premiums. You can insure a certain percentage of your crop, whether it's 50 percent or 70 percent or whatever. So it's handled in a very similar way to corn and soybeans.

DePue: But I would think the scale is a lot different. I mean a bad year for a soybean grower might be 50 percent yield. Is that not correct?

Eckert: Yes, I mean you can buy in at whatever level you want to protect yourself on. So I'm sure grain farmers might buy in at an 80 percent level or a 75 percent level. We participate at a 50 percent level simply because the premiums get too expensive beyond that.

DePue: So the government or the insurance policy would cover you for 50 percent of the value of the typical crop?

Eckert: Right.

DePue: What other government policies have been important to your particular family operation?

Eckert: Well in fruit production there's not a lot of government subsidies that are in the form of direct payments or anything like that. So the programs that we really enjoy and have benefited us would be more like the CRP program or the CSP program or equip programs that allow us to build terraces and do water conservation projects.

DePue: CRP and CSP being?

Eckert: CSP is—I can't remember—Conservation Sustainability Program I think and that is really designed to help with the expense of putting in waterways and preventing

erosion and doing certain types of production techniques that reduce erosion and improve conservation techniques in your farming operation.

DePue: Okay, going back to some of the other diverse activities you've got, when did the restaurant come along?

Eckert: We started with a small restaurant in the corner of our country store.

DePue: I've got a friend over here.

Eckert: Is she getting on the mic?

DePue: No, she's fine.

Eckert: Okay. The first restaurant started in about 1985 in a corner of our country store and we had eight tables and we served just lunches out of our bakery. We ventured into the restaurant business in a much bigger way in 1998 and we expanded our restaurant into what was our slaughterhouse. (coughs) The slaughterhouse business went out in the seventies. We stopped doing that business and then it was kind of a vacant facility. So then we expanded into—I think the family is coming back asleep now—but we expanded into the restaurant business in that same space.

DePue: The country store, is that an evolution of what the grocery store used to be?

Eckert: Yes. The country store that we have today is what our roadside market was. It was a roadside market, became a grocery store, and now is our country store.

DePue: And the same thing for the bakery?

Eckert: The bakery was started as a department within the grocery store, originally, and then really expanded into our country store in the late seventies and eighties and has continued to thrive since then.

DePue: What things do you specialize in the bakery?

Eckert: A big thing for us are pies, fruit pies in particular with logical reasoning, but we also started to come up with a line of our own products that are kind of signature products by season: peaches and cream cake, apple cakes, muffins, humble pie. As we've added more items we've been able to expand the business in that department.

DePue: And how about fresh meats, deli prepared foods? Is that also something that originated when it was more of a grocery store operation?

Eckert: Well you know we started out with livestock and a slaughterhouse and a fresh meat counter and that flourished for a long time. Then we actually got out of meat completely. We didn't have a meat counter at all in our store for probably twenty years and it as just four years ago that we reintroduced a meat counter in our stores. We see the population growing around us and the potential to have more year round

sales. Meat is a nice addition because people eat meat twelve months out of the year and we have a great supply of high quality meats available for us here in the local market. So it's a way for us to support local farmers too. All of our meats are sourced locally and we try to promote them in our store at the same time.

DePue: What caused the family to get out of the meat business though?

Eckert: It really was a factor of changing dynamics in regulation and also the way people shop and buy meat. That was really when the local grocer was—everyone went to the local butcher shop of the local grocer to get their meats for the week. Then all of a sudden the megamarts started coming along and people were going to the one stop shopping and we're seeing kind of resurgence of the independent grocer and the independent specialty shop today. People are very excited about supporting local agriculture today and they want to know where their food comes from and they'll pay a little extra for that. That's something that we also are excited about for obvious reasons, but we believe in it. We believe you get better food when you source it locally and the closer you are to the tree where your fruit was produced or the ranch where your beef was raised the better the quality of that meat typically is.

DePue: So do you see people coming from the St. Louis metro area all the way over here to get what they would consider the high quality organic foods?

Eckert: I wouldn't say that it's as much of a destination business from St. Louis, but we're able to draw from our local community in a better way. There's 150,000 people that live on this side of the river. So there's a large group of people that we can pull from to sell our products locally.

DePue: Wine cellar; is that a newer addition?

Eckert: Wine is a new addition. It was added the same time as our meat counter and again it was in an effort to look at how do we attract customers on a year round basis? And also it's what things are we excited about? There's been a great resurgence in the wine business. So people are drinking a lot more wine today than they ever have and there's so many wonderful wines out there, but it's a lot about education and identifying with your customer so that they get over the hurdles that they're afraid of buying wine.

DePue: I saw you had your own vines out here. You talked about peaches being converted into peach wine, but none of that is happening on site. Are these all local wines that you're featuring though?

Eckert: Absolutely not. We really see wine as a global market. There's great wines from all over the world and that includes Illinois and Missouri, but why limit yourself to just those and you can't get cabernet from a local wine maker. So we really want to have great wines from all over the world and great values and also just hard to find stuff.

DePue: And the custard shop, when did that come along?

Eckert: Custard shop started in the eighties which is it's frozen custard, it's ice cream, but it's got a higher butterfat content to it and it's not got any air whipped into it. So it's really unhealthy and great. So we think it's wonderful because you put fresh fruit on top of it and it cancels out the bad part of the custard.

DePue: Well I've overlooked one thing, which your wife would probably be upset about, the garden center. When did the garden center get added?

Eckert: We had kind of a seasonal garden center attached to our country store for many years. I think it started in the seventies and went on up until the late nineties. My wife has a degree in ornamental horticulture and has worked in botanical gardens and is extremely passionate about her plants. So when we got married and moved back here, she was tapped as a resource to make our plant business stronger and then we saw an opportunity that was a flourishing business in the nineties and we saw an opportunity to capitalize on that and build a new garden center and kind of restructure our whole retail facility and we did that. We built a large garden center and she managed that exclusively for probably five or six years and it's something that's a great addition to our business. It rounds out some of our seasonality because it's really strong in April and May and we find that as the local market grows it's another thing that people are looking for and like to buy locally because it has a strong educational component to it and we have a strong staff that can educate our customers about all the plants that we have.

DePue: I'm going to put you on the spot a little bit. It's such a diverse operation that you have now, I wonder if you can kind of prioritize what the more important or more profitable aspects of the business are and what things aren't quite as profitable as you'd like and then maybe transition then to what the future looks like?

Eckert: Absolutely and we talk about this all the time. I think that going into the next three to five years, our first priority is to try to build a new country store adjoining our garden center. We really see a lot of opportunity in developing the local market into a stronger retail base for us. We see lots of great trends in the industry for local foods, local plants, local suppliers to do well and we want to be ahead of that curve and be competitive in a marketplace that's becoming more competitive. So as Wal-Mart and all of the other things that come along with Wal-Mart go in next door to us, we have to raise our bar so that we can be relevant in a changing world. We don't want to become another mom and pop stat. We don't want to be one of those that is forced out of business because Wal-Mart came to town. So you can't do what you did for a hundred years and stay in business. You have to evolve and I think looking back at our family's history, that's evident that that's what we've done our whole life is change and evolve and take advantage of the markets that present themselves at the time and we will continue to do that. So what we see going forward as our first priority is to try to develop a retail market so that we can justify building a new facility and expanding our retail options. After that, we see a lot of opportunity in expanding our restaurant and taking in things like banquet rooms and expanded seating for our restaurant because as the market expands and as businesses expand in this area, there is not enough resources for meeting space and banquet space and

restaurant space. After that it's a little unclear. The things are always changing. We remain committed to agriculture in that we do not want to diminish our role in agriculture or the number of acres that we're producing on today. We see an opportunity to potentially even increase peach production a certain amount. We want to remain open on the current farms that we have open for pick your own apples and pumpkins, but we're probably not looking to expand with more location of pick your own farms at this point in time.

DePue: Would you think that the pick your own operation is more profitable right now than the wholesale peach market for you or is it? How would that sort itself out?

Eckert: It's really hard to say that it's more or less profitable. Wholesale peaches are a very good business for us, but it's also very volatile. Things can change quickly. A hail storm can approach. A freeze can approach. The market can become saturated and movement slows down and our prices go through the floor. So there's a lot of things that can impact that very quickly. When it's good, it does very well for us, but it can also have some real cost behind it. The pick your own business is a little more manageable for us. We can predict what we're going to do somewhat, but you're also at risk there with weather because most of our business occurs in about three weekends and if we get rain on one of those weekends, it has a dramatic negative impact on our sales.

DePue: What are those three weekends?

Eckert: Well it's the last weekend in September and the first two weekends of October. So those are very, very critical times for us and if you get a lot of rain in the fall, it is very devastating to your traffic. So there's things that you have to work with. The nice thing about being diversified like we are is it's rare for them all to happen at the same time. It's rare to have a bad thing happen in three or four different areas of your business in the same year, but at the same time, it's rare to have them all go well. (laughs) So I think diversification comes with its negative sides as well.

DePue: What seems to be the most stable, consistent aspect of the business?

Eckert: The most stability really comes from—I would say it comes from our pick your own. It's very predictable. The people love that part of what we do and it's a big driver for our customer counts. We have over a half million customers a year come out to the farm and it's such a wonderful experience. We do it better than anybody and I really think it's a great experience for families to share with their children.

DePue: With all of these operations, it obviously doesn't happen just with the family. How many employees would you say you have?

Eckert: We have a hundred. They're about fulltime, year round employees and seasonally we get up to about 400. So it's a big challenge and a big responsibility to make sure that the quality of that staff that we bring in every year is good and also knowledgeable about what we do because in the customer's eyes they are the family. They are an Eckert and all of our staff gets asked a lot of times, "Are you part of the family?" And

we're flattered by that. We want our customers to perceive all of our staff as part of the Eckert family because they are the face of our business to our consumer.

DePue: How many of the extended Eckert family are currently on the payroll?

Eckert: We have five family members currently employed fulltime in the business: myself, my wife, Angie, my sister, Jill, and my father, Lary, and his cousin, Jim.

DePue: And what is Lary and Jim doing? What are their roles?

Eckert: My dad is really trying to handoff responsibilities at this time and transition himself into more of a retired position, although I think it's challenging for us to take all those responsibilities on and it's challenging for him to give them up. I think when you love what you do, you don't necessarily want to stop doing it, but his position, officially, is chairman of the board and his day to day responsibilities are becoming fewer and fewer. Jim is responsible for the production agriculture part or our business. So he spends his days organizing the team of guys that take care of mowing and pruning and training the trees and doing all the harvesting. So that's his kind of day to day responsibility and I think he too is on the verge of trying to hand off more and more responsibilities and phase himself into more of a retirement mode.

DePue: And your title?

Eckert: I'm president of the company and Angie is vice president of retail operations and Jill, my sister, is vice president of food service, marketing and HR.

DePue: Okay, I think what we want to do here is take a very quick break and we'll come back and talk more about the rest of your employees.

Eckert: Okay.

(End of Audio File 1.1; Audio File 1.2 begins)

DePue: Chris, you mentioned that there's 400 employees at peak season and you've got a hundred fulltime employees. So what's the other 300?

Eckert: Well it's a mix and it depends on the time of the year. So in the fall is when we are at our maximum employment. A lot of that employment, that seasonal employment, tends to be high school kids, retired individuals. These are people that work on a pick your own farms driving the wagons for the public out to the field, working concession stands, doing things like that. This time of the year, in the summer, which is another kind of sub-peak of our employment season, we do have a lot of Hispanic labor on the payroll as well and they do a lot of our harvesting in the peach orchards and packing the fruit in our packing shed.

DePue: Well tell us a little bit more about that, in fact I want to talk quite a bit more about the migrant labor force you have here, since that's such an important topic in the United States right now. Where do they come from? How do they end up here?

Eckert: We really focus primarily on Mexicans. We've got a very good, stable management force from Mexico. We've got a couple individuals who are year round employees for us and specifically Martin is probably the top manager that we have. He's a Mexican who's now an American citizen and he's been with us for eighteen years, but he has really been a great resource for us in terms of recruiting people he knows and making sure that we have high quality individuals working for us that don't cause trouble and are good workers and also on the communication end of things so that we have good bilingual communication between us and the team doing the work. He's been a great resource for us.

DePue: What's his last name?

Eckert: Mauricio, M-a-u-r-i-c-i-o.

DePue: And is there one area of Mexico in particular that he finds the workers?

Eckert: Primarily from Michoacán, which is a state in Mexico and Cheranastico is the city in which Martin came from and we've maintained a good relationship with that particular area in getting recruits up from Cheranastico. Now things are changing a little bit in the last few years as H2A Program, these are agricultural visas that you can get for seasonal workers out of foreign countries. As we've adopted more of the H2A Program into our workforce, we're broadening that reach in Mexico. So not all of the people are coming from Cheranastico anymore. It's more boarder communities and so forth and we rely on firms that go and source H2A workers in Mexico for the agricultural industry.

DePue: Is that's why it's been changing in terms of the locations they're coming from?

Eckert: Yes because we're working with other organizations that kind of specialize in H2A employees and they have actual offices down in Mexico with recruiters and they basically put out help wanted ads in Mexico and say, "If you're looking for jobs, there's employers in the United States that are looking for workers," and they come in and they prescreen employees from Mexico and say, "Okay, we've found ten or twenty guys that we think are highly qualified to do what you want to do." Then they go through immigration at the consulate in Monterey, Mexico, and come up to Belleville on a bus.

DePue: Why Mexico?

Eckert: Well logistically they're close. They don't stay year round so they can get back home pretty easily. There's a large population and it's kind of what we're familiar with. We have a lot of long term Mexican employees that work in our organization and so we've developed good relationships with them and understand their culture and how things work in their families and so it just seems to be a system that has evolved in our business and effective evolution for us.

DePue: And why migrant force rather than a native workforce?

Eckert: That's tough. You know things are changing dramatically in our country and if you were to take a look back fifty years ago, you wouldn't see Mexicans working for us. It would be a totally different style of workforce and as the U.S. population has become basically fully employed and more focused on having a home and a secure place where they live, that workforce that was Americans looking for harvest jobs and moving around the country as the crops moved around the country has disappeared. There's not Americans that do that anymore and I think that's good. That's great that we are as prosperous as we are as a nation. Unfortunately for fruit growers, you are dependent upon hand labor to do the work. There's not mechanical devices out there to harvest peaches or apples or strawberries. They're all harvested by hand and until we can find a mechanical way to harvest our crops, we are going to be dependent upon a seasonal workforce to come in and do that for us.

DePue: What—if you're willing to talk about this—the kind of pay and benefits that the migrant workforce would get?

Eckert: The migrant workforce, the minimum wage basically starts out at $10.00 an hour. So it's not a low paying wage relative to minimum wage nationally. The state minimum wage today is $7.75 I believe and we're starting our Hispanic workers out at $10.00 an hour and they earn peace work bonuses on top of that. So some of these guys are making $13.00-14.00 an hour plus we provide them with free housing and they get provide with transportation to and from Mexico and to and from work every day.

DePue: Are there any meals that are provided?

Eckert: No meals. They provide their own meals, but they are provided transportation to and from the grocery store or wherever they needed to go. We pay for all of that. So relatively speaking, they have little expense while they're here in the states so that they end up doing quite well when they go home.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about the housing that you provide.

Eckert: It's really a mix of different things. We've got a labor camp, which is a state regulated labor camp and I'd say of the living arrangements we have it's probably the least desirable. Even though it is state regulated, it's pretty dormitory like and pretty rigid and structured and not very spacious. We go from that to some old farmhouses that have been renovated for use for these guys and it kind of depends on the group. There are some guys who are year round employees and have their families here. Well they have a house. They've got their own home and some of those homes are provided for. We provide housing for some of them completely as part of their pay compensation. It's all negotiated as part of any type of employment negotiation would go, but it ranges from the labor camp to farmhouses. I think we have one mobile home trailer, some old brick buildings—actually they're not old. It's a new brick building that has been converted into some rooms and so forth. So it's really a mix of different styles of living facilities.

DePue: Do some of them that travel back and forth each year, do they come as families or do they come as individuals?

Eckert: Most of them come as individuals. Now H2A—if we go and how things were maybe before H2A, visas were part of the system, there might have been more families coming in. Today border security is much more stringent. Trying to get across the border with your family is very, very risky. Most of those guys coming in are illegal aliens. They're sneaking into the U.S. For years that was the way the system worked. There are laws, but the border was open, basically, and people would cross in and they'd come into the United States and there are underground networks for them to get false social security cards and false green cards and they would present you these documents and they look real and you take down their information and they go to work for you and then at the end of the year you get these things back from the IRS saying these are mismatches. These social security numbers don't match our files. You've got a mistake here. Well by that time, that person's gone and back in Mexico or wherever. Well that has kind of stopped now or it is stopping because the border has gotten a lot tighter after nine-eleven. Border security has become a lot higher priority.

DePue: How long has this H2A aspect of the immigration law been in effect though?

Eckert: I think H2A visas started back in the nineties, but weren't really widely implemented, but they're becoming—in the last three years has really become a big deal because the other way of doing business is becoming impossible because the border security is tightening up.

DePue: Is that the function that Martin plays in? He's the one who's insuring that these are legal, temporary immigrants on work visas, on H2A visas?

Eckert: No. It's a double-edged sword because if somebody presents you with a document, you can't question it. So if an employee brings you a social security card or a green card, you can't question its authenticity. If it looks like it's supposed to look, you have to accept it because then you can be sued for discrimination. So it's a double edge sword for the employer which way to go. So what we have done as an employer is said, well there are a lot of Mexicans coming to us with social security cards and green cards. We're opting to go with H2A Visa Program just to make sure that we know that everyone that we bring in to work for us is legally documented and legally here and that there's no question about it.

DePue: How long have you been involved with the H2A Program?

Eckert: Really been started on it about three years ago. The St. Louis area has got a pretty large Hispanic population. So there's a lot of Hispanic base here that wants to work and it's hard to decide should you be employing these people because they're coming in and they're showing you documentation and it looks legitimate and they're good workers or could it be false. You don't know until the end of the year when you get the information back.

DePue: The government is not there to help you determine whether these documents are false or accurate?

Eckert: Well I think there might be a website—I'm not sure—that you can go to and type in a social security number. That would seem like it would be rare to be able to go into a website, but this is the whole problem with comprehensive immigration reform.

DePue: Well that's the next question. Give me your opinion about the current state of affairs as far as immigration is concerned?

Eckert: Well it's very frustrating as an employer that's caught in the middle of this because we're dependent upon a workforce to do these jobs and it's not as if we're turning Americans down for these jobs. We don't get any Americans applying for the jobs. At the same time, you have a large Hispanic community that's caught in the middle and it's really sad because there's about twelve million Mexicans in the United States that are here illegally and what are you going to do with these people? These people that are hardworking and have done a lot to improve the lifestyles of many Americans and our economy has become somewhat dependent upon this workforce in a lot of ways, not just in agriculture, fruit production, but you go to the hotel. Who's cleaning the rooms when you go away? Who's washing the sheets? Who's in the kitchens in the restaurants? I guarantee you in just about every kitchen that you go into of every restaurant in the United States you're going to find Hispanic workers in the backroom. They're doing a lot of the work that Americans don't want to do and unfortunately these people are caught in a very tough spot and it's not really fair to them because Americans created this system that allowed them to come in and employ them. We had unsecured borders for twenty years or for hundreds of years really and now we're suddenly becoming very diligent about this and are somehow surprised that this happened. I mean why are we really surprised that we're in this situation? So to just say, "Well we're going to close the border and that's going to fix the problem," avoids the real problem. The real problem is we have twelve million undocumented Mexicans living in the United States today. They're doing a lot of work for a lot of companies, not just agricultural companies. There's an estimated one and a half million illegal Mexicans working in agriculture today, but they're working in a lot of industries: construction, food service, hospitality. What are we going to do with them because if you look back, we're all immigrants? We were all here because we wanted a better life from some other country. So it's a little hypocritical for us to turn our back on today's immigrants and those people that are trying to get a better life for themselves. So we talked a lot toady about history and the fact that my ancestors came here in 1837 and they were welcomed into this society and why are we now scared of welcoming another immigrant into our society that only I think can help make it a better place.

DePue: A lot of the dialogue today and people who are trying to figure out what the problem is say, "Well part of the problem is employers who are willing to hire illegals in the first place." Do you have any comments on that?

Eckert: Yes, I do and if employers are taking advantage of a situation, meaning that they're abusing employees because they know they're illegal aliens, I have a real problem with that. The Latino workers that we have are friends of ours and these are people that I have the utmost respect for and I am dependent on. So for me to think of abusing them in some way is really thinking of abusing my own business and I have a hard time thinking in those terms, but there are people out there that take advantage of situations that present themselves and they are abusive towards illegal aliens because they know that they don't have any legal recourse, whatsoever, to take on the employer and that's dangerous. I think that's an unhealthy situation. So I agree in that sense that there is a problem. To think that farmers can pay $50,000 a year to somebody to pick fruit is unrealistic. So to think that the real problem here is that agricultural business owners just want cheap labor and we should just increase the wage to $25.00 an hour so we can entice Americans to come in and work for us and earn $50,000 a year as a laborer on an agricultural farm is just saying, "We're going to move all of our fruit production outside of the United States because we can't do it." People will not pay the price in our grocery stores. The food market is too competitive. You look today, food prices have gone up 20 percent over the last two years, and there's an upheaval in our society over the cost of the grocery store bill. Imagine what it would cost if you had to pay $30.00 an hour to have your fruit harvested versus today having to pay $10.00 or $12.00 an hour. So you're talking about enormous increases in the cost of food and our society is not going to stand for it. We're going to open our borders and allow the food to be produced in Mexico where they can make the money there.

DePue: If you had the power to wave your wand and to change immigration law, what would you want to see?

Eckert: Well I think that there's two questions. There's the solution. How do we go forward from here? What are we going to do about the employees not that we have today, but the employees that we're going to have in three years from now? Because let's face it, these are bottom rung level jobs. These are not jobs that people necessarily retire on. These are jobs that people have to move themselves to a different place on the financial ladder. So you're constantly going to be getting new employees in these jobs as time goes by and I think programs like the H2A Program are pretty effective at addressing that issue. It allows Hispanic workers a way in to come in and do these entry level labor positions, but I think you have to make sure that you're not creating a system for indentured servants either. You don't want to just lock them into this is all they can be in life is migrant labor. You want to allow them to have a way to improve themselves as well. So I think that's a little shortfall of the H2A Program is it doesn't allow for them to climb a ladder within your business. They're kind of locked in as a laborer. Then the second problem is what do you do with the twelve million people that are here? I think there has to be an avenue for citizenship for these people. I mean they are here with their families. A lot of these people have been here for generations. It's not just one generation, but it's been that their families moved here when they were children and now they are adults having children in the United States. So there needs to be an avenue for these people to become legal citizens of this country, otherwise you want to try to throw twelve million people out of the

country and you think we already have people around this world mad at us now, try to throw twelve million people out of your country.

DePue: Well the ones who are born here, though, are automatically American Citizens.

Eckert: Yes, not completely though because now I believe there is new laws in place that if you are the child of two illegal aliens, you aren't necessarily native born American.

DePue: Well that's certainly very much part of the political dialogue and we're in the heat of a political season right now. Are you generally in favor of the current trend for tightening the borders?

Eckert: Well I think it makes sense. Loose borders is what got us here in the first place, but I think being an elitist nation is not healthy for any type of relationship either. So while there needs to be regulation of how people can get in and out of a country, I think that as a country we should be welcoming all people who are coming here with good intention. So it's hard to filter out the good and the bad, but we as a country are great because people came here, not because we kept people away from here.

DePue: Okay, any final thoughts on immigration before we move to the final series of questions for today?

Eckert: I don't think so.

DePue: Okay. The family's been through a lot since 1837 and obviously done very well to retain the business, to grow the business, to find how to thrive in a changing environment. What do you think the most significant and transformative changes in agriculture that you've seen just in your time, in your experience, is?

Eckert: Well in terms of fruit production, we tend to move a little slower than what you see in other agriculture and we've not been able to break into the genetically modified end of the industry yet. So when you're developing new varieties and new growing techniques, they tend to take more time and what you've seen in apple production is this move toward much higher density production, which allows you to get fruit into production much more quickly and also get higher production per acre. That's probably the greatest advance that we've seen in horticulture in terms of peaches and apples over the last twenty years, but in terms of other things that we do, I mean really I would say the post handling of fruit has gotten much better and that has good and bad consequences for us. As the post handling of fruit is advanced, people in other areas can bring better tasting fruit into our market. So we get more level playing fields and you don't have as much local advantage. So it creates a challenge, but it also creates an advantage for us because we can, again, harvest riper fruit and produce better eating experience for our customer at the same time and so we have to continue to adapt those new technologies as they become available to us to remain competitive.

DePue: So much of your business that's really impressed me deals with history, the history of your family, forming memories for these people who are coming out in the pick your own operation and we kind of touched on that a little bit when we were overlooking

your orchards, your apple orchards and seeing that urban growth coming towards you as well. So what's the emotional tug of war, if you will, that's going on in the Eckert family right now in terms of what's going to happen in the future?

Eckert: It is a little bit of a tug of war because we have a lot of emotional value wrapped up in these farms and emotional value doesn't always equal financial value. So they do kind of pull at each other. It's so important in our family that we keep the communication open and that we have a clear understanding of what it is we want to do so that there's not a disconnect between one branch and another branch and suddenly the whole thing would come apart. So we work very diligently to have outside advisors giving us advice on how to run the business, to have open shareholder meetings with all the family can attend and discuss these issues and make sure that all voices are heard and everyone understands where we're going and why we're going and not necessarily that we all are 100 percent in agreement with it, but we all have an understanding of what we're doing and are behind the fact that we want to be successful as a family.

DePue: What do you think your grandfather would say or your great-great-grandfather would say about what's going on right now?

Eckert: I think about that a lot and I've always had a lot of respect for my ancestors. They got me to where I am and I always look back and say, "Am I doing enough to make them happy? Would they be impressed with what we're doing?" It's a tough question to answer because from a priority standpoint, family's one and business is two and you have to do both of them well. I always try to balance that and make sure that I'm doing my best for my family here at home and also being smart in the business end of things because without a successful business, suddenly family becomes a lot harder to keep happy and we've got to make sure we're balancing those together.

DePue: This piece of property we're sitting in right now has been in the family for well over a hundred years, but yet you've got this urban encroachment. So what would they think about that looming decision, perhaps, to sell it?

Eckert: Oh well, you know I think about that too and sometimes I wonder if great-great-great grandpa would come here and shake his head like what are you sentimental idiots thinking about? I didn't give up everything I had in Germany to let you come here and be sentimental over a piece of property. I came here to do a better thing for my life and provide a better opportunity for my children. So there's a tug of war and you have to be true to yourself on the financial end of things and you also can't just sell yourself out and we're working very hard to make sure we maximize both of those and do the best for not only us, but the future legacy that we're going to leave behind in this business and the future opportunities for our children and what they do.

DePue: Well let's talk about children. Tell me a little bit about your children.

Eckert: I have two children. I have a daughter, Ella. She's four and I have a son, Theo, who just turned one. Both of our children are adopted. Ella is from China and Theo is from South Korea.

DePue: Do you see in twenty years, thirty years that your children and your cousin's children will be inheriting this business and running it for the family?

Eckert: I hope that I can do a good enough job of making this an interesting option for them to consider. (laughs) I think the viability of this business is really—for the next generation—is dependent upon how successful we can make it in our generation. So while those things are fun to think about and probably in the long term really important, I think for the next fifteen years we need to focus on doing the best we can for our generation and making this successful for the next fifteen years. We get to that point I think if we're thriving and trying new things and even more diversified and expanding, keeping them in the business is going to be no problem. It's going to be harder to keep them out of the business. So I think those will be fun discussions to have at the time.

DePue: Any final thoughts in closing?

Eckert: No, I don't think so. I think we covered a lot of ground.

DePue: We did, indeed, cover a lot of ground. It's been a wonderful opportunity for us to hear the story about your family, about this operation and get a sense of how your particular business has grown and evolved and, again, thrived from generation to generation. So we thank you for that opportunity.

Eckert: My pleasure.

DePue: Thanks, Chris.

(End of Audio File 1.2; Audio File 2 begins)

DePue: Chris, we just came from your main operation and I think we traveled about seven miles here. Why don't you tell us a little bit about what we've got in this particular orchard.

Eckert: Okay, well this particular variety that we're looking at right now is called John Boy. It's a new variety for us and we plant different varieties to give us different ripening dates through the course of the season. So we'll start the season about mid-June with a Cling peach called Garnet Beauty and we go through the season through subsequent varieties, Red Haven, Jim Dandy, John Boy, Loring, Cresthaven and so forth to extend our season as long as possible so it extends our retail opportunities at the same time. One of the biggest challenges with harvesting fruit like a peach is that not all of the peaches on the tree ripen at the same time. So we go through these trees every three days and harvest as they ripen. So this is probably the third picking on this particular field right now and we're getting a fair amount of fruit, but as you can see, there's still the green fruit in here. So we're going to have to come back yet another

time to finish picking this particular tree. We usually pick our peaches about five times, so it's over a course of fifteen days, every three days, five pickings, fifteen days to harvest all the peaches from one tree.

DePue: Now I notice, to me at least, to the untrained eye, there's not a whole lot of difference between the two peaches you just picked, but there obviously was to you. What are you looking for when it's ripe?

Eckert: Well when a peach is completely ripe, and this one may not even be completely ripe here, but you're not going to have this greenish color in the background. It's going to be completely yellow and fully mature and I'll see if I can find one here. You've got to look around a little bit. So you can see just a little difference here. The background on this one is fully yellow while this one is still a little green. This is a more mature piece of fruit. This one is ready to pick. It's still firm, so it's going to handle through the transportation out of the field and packing it and distributing it to the grocery stores, but it's going to have all the sugar it needs to taste really good.

DePue: How much ripening does it do once it's been picked?

Eckert: What's interesting about a peach is once it's harvested, it will produce no more sugar. So all of the sugar is generated while it's hanging on the tree and that is one of the distinct advantages we have as a local grower because the riper you pick this fruit, the worse it's going to handle through a distribution system. So it's harder to take a ripe peach from California and ship it all the way into the mid-West and have it arrive in any type of good condition. We can pick riper fruit so it's got more sugar in it and our distribution is not so widespread, so we can deliver a better tasting fruit to the consumer and create a good market advantage for ourselves.

DePue: Let's talk a little bit about the trees themselves. What strikes me here immediately is they're just not that tall, but I assume there is a reason for that.

Eckert: Well these trees are young, so this is a youthful orchard and it will continue to get quite a bit bigger. We like to have our trees about ten to twelve feet tall. Typically when a tree is fully mature, they're going to have to use ladders to harvest the fruit. They like these orchards because our crew doesn't have to carry ladders through here to harvest the peaches, so they're a lot faster and they're not as tired at the end of the day, but you don't get quite the production that you really need off of an acre of this size of tree compared to a fully grown tree.

DePue: Let's talk about production. What would you expect to get off one mature tree and then let's talk about how much you get form an acre?

Eckert: We like to think in terms of numbers of fruits per tree. One of the old sayings about peach growing is you're going to get the same bushels of peaches off of an acre whether they're an inch in diameter or three inches in diameter. You're just going to have more peaches that are really small. Peaches, by their nature, overproduce. We only need about 10 percent of the actual blooms to create a full crop. So we spend almost as much money reducing the fruit from the tree as we do harvesting the fruit

from the tree. We target about 250 to 350 peaches per tree and if we get that, we're going to generate about two and a half to three and a half bushels per tree.

DePue: When you say reduced the fruit on the tree, how are you doing that?

Eckert: Thinning peaches is an art, not a science, a lot of times. We will go through every block three times. We go through the first time during bloom. You're going to do the most bang for your buck early in the season. So we really try to aggressively thin the crop while it's still blooming, taking off as much as 50 percent of the blooms on the tree and we do that with toilet bowl brushes. So we come through here with our guys and they have toilet bowl brushes on their hands and they're just brushing flowers off the tree like crazy and we do a lot of good with that. Then we come through the second time about three weeks after bloom and there's a stage that we call shatter in the peach orchard where the peaches actually get a little loose on the tree. So if you shake a branch like this, peaches will just fall off on the ground. At that time we give our guys rubber hoses and we go through with rubber hoses and we just hit the branches with rubber hoses and indiscriminately really just knock a percentage of the fruit off the tree. Then we come back a third time in June and we go through by hand and actually go in and reduce clusters of fruit down so that they are not growing right next to each like this, which would cause them to deform. We pull off and single out the fruit so it can be nice and round and have good shape and high quality. So it's a very labor intensive, expensive way of producing a crop, but it also gives you the highest quality of fruit for the consumer.

DePue: How does it pollinate then? Is that a problem?

Eckert: Pollination is really not a problem with peaches. Peaches are self pollinating, so we don't really need the assistance of bees in our peach orchards or anything like that. Now saying that, weather plays a big role in the success of your pollination. So when you have years like the year we've just had where it was cool and cloudy and wet, pollination is not quite as good as it is when it's warmer and sunny. So that sometimes works to your benefit, though, because you don't need all that stuff to pollinate anyway. It actually reduced our thinning bill in years when things are not as pollinated as other years.

DePue: How much maintenance do you need to do, other than what you've already described on these and I'm thinking especially fertilization, herbicides, pesticides?

Eckert: Peaches are nitrogen hogs. So they like to have nitrogen every year. Now it's not like corn and soybeans where we have a huge fertilizer bill every year. Perennial crops tend to be a little more lax on the fertilizer uptake than annual crops, but we put in nitrogen every year for these. We also have to be very aware of what's going on under the tree in terms of herbicide control because if we have grass and weed growing underneath the trees, that creates competition for water and also an alternate host for insects and things that might damage the crop, but the most expensive part of what we do is labor and all of our perennial crops are very labor intense, so it require hand pruning, hand thinning, hand harvesting. So we have a lot of people going

through these orchards every year to make sure that the peach trees are shaped right, thinned right and harvested right. The second biggest input cost that we have is our spray bill. We live in a wet, humid environment. It's great for high quality fruit. It's also great for high quality diseases and insects. They love the environment too. You just spend an evening outside in Illinois and you'll get bit up by all the mosquitoes and there's a lot of other things that like biting fruit. So we have to be very careful about making sure that those pests are under control. So we spend a lot of time monitoring the orchards through scouting programs and insect trapping programs so that we can have counts of how many insects are out here and you're not wasting sprays when you don't need to so that you're reducing it as much as possible. You also want to isolate problems. If it's a problem that's just isolated to one section of an orchard, there's really no reason to try to control a certain pest in the entire orchard. We just want to control it where it's a problem. So we've had a lot of success through integrated pest management and reducing the amount of chemicals that we put on, which is not only an environmental benefit, but it's also an economic benefit to us because that's very expensive and very time consuming.

DePue: What are the chemicals that you use for pesticides?

Eckert: The list is long and distinguished, but there's a lot of chemicals that we use as fruit growers that you would not see in the row crop farms and as time goes by, it gets more and more evolved, so the control is highly specific. So, for an example, not necessarily in peaches, but in apples there is one particular insect that has five different chemicals that work in five different ways of controlling one insect and they work at different times in the lifecycle and they work at different times of the year. So you have to be very much in control of your application timing, the rates and what the weather is doing at the time and also knowing what the insect is doing at the time. Is it a larvae? It is a pupa? Is it an adult? Is it flying? Is it crawling? What is that insect doing and are we putting on the appropriate chemical to control at that time? The benefit of that is you have good control of the insect and you're not doing harm to other things on the farm that are beneficial because there are also insects that are beneficial to the production of your crop.

DePue: I'm curious, what was the one insect that's especially dangerous to apples?

Eckert: Codling moth. Codling moth is a real pest to apples and here in the state of Illinois there was, for tens of years, for a long time there was an organophosphate chemical that was a broad spectrum insecticide that basically killed everything in sight and here in Illinois we were one of the first places to develop resistance to organophosphates in codling moth. So for the last probably ten, fifteen years there's been a lot of aggressive research being done at University of Illinois and really got some new chemistry and some new techniques at controlling it very effectively.

DePue: What's the enemy of these trees we see here?

Eckert: The enemy in peaches is primarily weather. Diseases and insects, while they are a problem, they're very manageable in terms of peach production. Weather is your

biggest risk, especially in Illinois. Right now these trees are forming the buds for next year's crop and so those buds are on these trees all winter long.

DePue: Can you show us what one might look like? Put you on the spot here.

Eckert: So if you look in here, you'll see right in these areas you'll see little black spots. Those are the buds forming for next year and by the end of the summer, they're going to be completely formed and they're going to be next year's peach crop. So these buds have to sit out here all winter long and endure pretty cold temperatures. If we dip below zero we start to kill these buds. Peach trees are not a very hardy fruit tree. So there's a lot of years that we lose our entire crop as a result of freeze. That's the risk of growing fruit this far north, but it's also part of the reward because you don't always have a lot of competition.

DePue: And that's what happened—how many years ago was it?

Eckert: Well we lost our entire crop last year, but that was a little bit different. There's other risks too because last year what happened is we had a really warm March and when it's warm early in the spring, well the tree thinks it's ready to go. It's wanting to go to work and produce fruit. So those buds start to open up and flower and actually by the first of April we had little peaches hanging out on the trees. Then we had the Easter Freeze of 2007 and that time it got down in the low twenties for three nights in a row and we lost our entire peach crop and about 85 percent of our apple crop; very rare event. The only other time it's happened in our company's history is 1955. That was the last time we lost both of our crops. So that's a rare event. When we talk about winter kill, when it dips below zero in January, February, that's a more frequent event for peach problems and we think about once every ten years you're going to suffer a loss like that.

DePue: I notice that there's an awful lot of spoilage I guess is what you would call it that's laying on the ground here. Can you tell us if that's a problem?

Eckert: Typically when you get into the commercial production like we're in here where we have our own crews harvesting the fruit, it's not much of a problem. What you see the guys who are harvesting the fruit are going to make some decisions if a peach is too small or if it's got some damage to it. They might just throw it on the ground. They might not have seen it when they picked it. You also are going to lose some when it storms. You know if it gets a little windy and the branches start to rustle around, some fruit will fall off the tree. Overall I would say that this is not a serious situation in this particular block of fruit. When we go to our orchards that we do pick your own fruit in, where we allow customers to come directly out to the farm and harvest the fruit themselves, you'll notice that there's a lot more spoilage on the ground in those situations and that's okay. That's part of the experience. A customer is going to pick a peach and decide, "I don't like it," and throw it on the ground or maybe they take one bite out of it and throw it on the ground or maybe the kids are throwing them at each other, which they're not supposed to do, but they're going to do it and what you find

is that the return for the farmer is so much better letting the customers come out and pick that even with the spoilage you get on the ground, it's worth it to get the profit.

DePue: But I would think a lot of the fruit that's laying on the ground is perfectly fine, it's just got some kind of a blemish or imperfection, if you will, that it could be used for some application.

Eckert: It can be and once fruit hits the ground, though, you cannot harvest it. It is spoiled. You worry about E. coli and things like that and we're out in the wilderness here so there are wild animals, deer and fox and coyotes and you might have some fecal material on the orchard floor. So any time a piece of fruit hits the orchard floor, it's going to stay there.

DePue: Is that an industry standard or is that by regulation or law?

Eckert: It's an industry standard. It's not necessarily law. I do know, especially in the apple industry where they make a lot of juice and cider, they do not accept any apples off the orchard floor. A juice plant will not take any apples that have been harvested from the ground. So it's pretty recognized industry wide that that's something that you don't want to get into.

DePue: Anything else you'd like to tell us about peaches, maintenance of the peaches before we catch up and get a little bit of film footage with a crew that's picking them?

Eckert: I'm good.

DePue: Thanks, Chris. (Pause in recording) Chris, tell us a little bit about what these pickers are looking for.

Eckert: Well they're going through here and now this is a pretty heavy picking in this particular variety. This is Starfire and they're going through and just checking to make sure the fruit's got full color and then they selectively harvest the stuff that's fully mature. So you can see he's kind of taking his time and looking at the fruit and also trying to go as fast as possible because they want to get through this as quickly as they can.

DePue: How are they paid then? By the hour or by the basket or what?

Eckert: They get paid by both. They get paid a regular hourly wage plus a fifteen cent a tote harvest bonus. So these guys can harvest sometimes up to 200 totes a day.

DePue: A tote is these boxes?

Eckert: Yes, these are harvest totes and plus with the regular wage they can make a handsome pay.

DePue: Do they keep track of the exact number of totes that they've each got?

Eckert: If you look up here by the wagon you'll see one guy has got a yellow pad and he's recording every guy as he brings in a full tote of peaches and he's also checking the quality of the harvest. We wants to make sure that the basket is full, that they're not picking too many green ones, that they're not putting branches inside the basket to fill it up. So it's just a matter of keeping them accountable for the quality of the harvest and also rewarding them for efficiency in filling their baskets.

DePue: I notice that we have an entirely male crew here. Is that typical?

Eckert: Very typical. Sometimes we'll have female people working the trailers, but this is a very physically demanding job. That basket, full, is going to weigh about forty pounds and you're going up and down ladders a lot of times with that and all day long, so it's pretty grueling work.

DePue: Okay. What are the hours that they would typically work?

Eckert: Well it really is dictated by the trees. When the peaches are ready to harvest, we keep on harvesting until they're picked and we start about six or six thirty in the morning, as soon as we have enough light to see the fruit, and we go until we're done picking all the peaches for that day. So right now we're kind of ahead of schedule and we're getting done one to three o'clock in the afternoon, but last week there was a lot of fruit ripening and we were working twelve to fourteen hours a day to stay ahead of the fruit.

DePue: There's no maximum limit at the amount that they can work on a particular day?

Eckert: There is a maximum limit and the guys tell us. "Look, we're done. We need a break," and so typically though these guys want to work as many hours as they can because this is seasonal work. So they want to put in all the hours and make as big a paycheck as they possibly can. So I'm always impressed with the output that they can generate.

DePue: How many in this particular work crew?

Eckert: We have about thirteen to fourteen guys on each crew. We've got two harvest crews out every day and these guys can pick about a maximum about thirty-five hundred totes in a day with two crews. So this trailer holds about a hundred. So about thirty-five loads of peaches a day is about our maximum.

DePue: I guess I wasn't paying close enough attention. You've got two crews working?

Eckert: Yes.

DePue: And how long will they be here with you?

Eckert: It depends. Our crew's kind of increase and decrease in size. We are at our peak right now during peach harvest and from about July fifteenth to September first we're going to be in the neighborhood of about thirty gentlemen on our crew and then we kind of scale back through apple season to about twenty guys and then in the winter

we're basically shut down until we start pruning in February and then we're up to about twenty guys again. So it kind of ebbs and flows as the demand of the season changes.

DePue: But it's not strictly just for picking. It's for all these other high labor tasks that you were talking about before.

Eckert: Yes.

DePue: But I would assume that a lot of these guys move from harvest to harvest, from state to state and region to region.

Eckert: It used to be that way, but it's really not anymore as things have changed in the laws and how we can do H2A visas and so forth. It's very regulated and so these guys have come from Mexico, this particular crew, and they are designated to work for us for a specific length of time doing specific jobs. So they really don't have the freedom to go to another grower once we're finished. We actually transport these guys back to Mexico and the work is done. It used to be more of a transient population and for hundreds of years a lot of the hand labor that was done in agriculture was done by migrant types of workers that would start in the South. In the early spring they'd start harvesting in Mississippi and Texas and come up through Arkansas and Illinois and end up in Michigan and then kind of work their way south again. It's not that way anymore. It's a totally different economy with the more regulated immigration policy we have. Plus, Americans really don't like to do this work. We've got pretty low unemployment. We're blessed in this country with low unemployment and Americans want to work year round. They don't want to do seasonal work and they want to stay home. A lot of people have invested a lot of money in their homes and family and they don't want to be transporting themselves all over the country as the seasons change. So it's left—fruit growers, especially fruit and vegetable growers, in kind of a predicament on how to get the work done.

DePue: Let's go ahead and follow this around as it pulls out here. Go ahead, Chris.

Eckert: So fruit and vegetable growers have really had to adapt over the last twenty, thirty years where I would say in the forties and the fifties it was primarily Americans doing a lot of this work and then between the sixties and the eighties it really transitioned into immigrants doing this work. So now you see probably 99 percent of your fruits and vegetables in the United States are harvested by Mexicans. It's just the economy has worked and the only way we've been able to get labor to do the jobs that we have to do.

DePue: Anything else you need to tell us while we're here, then, Chris?

Eckert: You tell me.

DePue: Well let's move onto the next part of the operation then.

Eckert: Okay. (Pause in recording) We will do it. (Pause in recording) I've been doing an interview. I haven't been out there. No problem. Bye bye.

DePue: Chris, we're obviously here at the beginning of your packing operation and tell us what exactly we're looking at.

Eckert: Well we bring the trailers out of the field as we saw out in the orchard and as soon as they get in here we hand dump the fruit onto a conveyer belt and these peaches are going into a hydrocooler. We do things a little different. It's not uncommon to hydrocool fruit, but we're really just trying to take field heat out of the fruit, so we're going to spend two minutes in thirty-three degree water and in those two minutes we can chill the peach twenty degrees. So we're really trying to take a hot piece of fruit and get it to room temperature. What that does is that kind of stops the ripening process or at least slows it down extremely and also gets the fruit into a stable situation so it's going to handle with a lot more resilience when we go through our packing line.

DePue: How much do you have to be concerned about bruising when you're going through all of this processing?

Eckert: It is a real problem and historically, before we were doing this process, we would lose about a third of the peaches we would harvest because they would get bruised and damaged after they were harvested. Now we're getting that down to about 15 percent, which is still a lot of fruit that you end up throwing away, but there's also fruit that's harvested that probably didn't need to be harvested anyway and we'll never get that to zero, most likely, but it has been seriously reduced and has been very beneficial for us.

DePue: This water, is it totally immersed in this water or is it just spraying on it?

Eckert: No, it's kind of like a gentle rain and it's just kind of trickling down on top of the fruit inside of there.

DePue: All the way through this tunnel?

Eckert: Yes.

DePue: And you say that's a two minute operation?

Eckert: Yes, two minutes. It goes through here for two minutes. The cold water is recycled through a chilling tower inside and constantly reused.

DePue: Let's go ahead and get a shot of the water that's coming out it looks like. (Pause in recording) cycle back in?

Eckert: That's the return catch basin and it pumps it back into the chilling tower and then cycles it back through the hydrocooler.

DePue: Okay, it looks like we're ready to move to the actual packing operation then and Chris, I assume what we're looking at here is just coming out of that cooling operation, dumps onto the conveyer belt.

Eckert: This elevated conveyer takes it inside of the packinghouse where we sort and size the fruit (pause in recording).

DePue: Chris, now we're looking at the receiving end here. Tell us what we've got.

Eckert: Well inside of this machine is where we wash the fruit and we're just trying to give it a gentle wash with some soft brushes to remove any excess fuzz. Once it comes out of there, it goes onto this roller table and they're sorting out any bad fruit that they might find and that fruit might have a blemish on it or be overripe or damaged from transportation and they can drop it into these drops and it goes into a number two belt and it will either go into a number two box that might go for making jam or jelly or ultimately into a bin that goes out for making wine. So all of the part that's going here goes to a winery for peach wine.

DePue: You were talking about washing. I would assume you're also washing to get rid of any lingering pesticides?

Eckert: That's really not a concern. Pesticides really degrade in the sunlight and the atmosphere. We're more concerned about fuzz because it is very unattractive. If it's too fuzzy it balls up in the handling of the fruit and also any type of dirt that might have gotten on the fruit whether it's from a bird or from the environment.

DePue: So you're telling me that the consumer does not have to be concerned about pesticides?

Eckert: I think we need to be concerned about eliminating anything that is not necessary, but our government does a great job of regulating that type of pest control and all of the chemicals that are used in any agricultural operation are really designed to degrade in the sunlight, in the environment so that there's really no harm, whatsoever, to humans.

DePue: Okay, well let's follow along the operation then, if we could. Chris, what do we have now?

Eckert: So the fruit comes off of the sorting table and then it gets cingulated into two rows. The peaches go into these cups as they go down the conveyer belt and as they pass across here, there's a scale. Right in this area they're being weighed. Each piece of fruit is weighed and then the computer interprets by weight what size that peach is and knows where to drop it on the sorting line. After it gets weighed, it goes past a sticker machine to get stickered and labeled with a PLU number and also with country of origin labeling, which is now a requirement for all produce being grown in the United States. As it goes down the conveyer, you can see it drops off at different spots along the line. Each of those drops are a different size of fruit and the people packing that fruit at that station put it in a different box accordingly.

DePue: Now I notice in this case, in the field we had all men. In this case it's primarily the ladies who are working the line.

Eckert: We find that women are a little more particular when it comes to packing fruit, so we end up getting a higher quality pack out from the women than from the men, but it's also we do get applicants both male and female and we find that this is physically a more suitable job for women than for men, whereas the picking is really physically limiting for women.

DePue: Chris, what kind of hours would these ladies be working?

Eckert: Here too, just like the field, is dictated by the trees. As the peaches are ripe, we're going to pick them. As the peaches are picked, we're going to pack them. So we follow the same schedule as the harvest crew. We start about an hour later packing fruit and we finish about an hour later. So if the crew quits picking at three o'clock, we're going to stop packing at four o'clock. We pack all of the peaches the same day they're harvested.

DePue: How often do they get a break and how long is the break?

Eckert: Well we get a break every couple hours for fifteen-minute breaks and then a half-hour lunch and they tell us, "We need a break." All right, let's take a break, but here too, these guys are very resilient. They work hard and they're great folks. We have a very fortunate team here.

DePue: So additional packing?

Eckert: Here there's no piece rates in the warehouse because it's not as easy to determine a piece that they would be paid upon. So this is simply an hourly wage in here.

DePue: Now here's a really peculiar question. Is there a certain status that it's better to pack the big peaches than the small peaches?

Eckert: Big peaches are easier to pack than small peaches. Here we're moving the women around all over the place. So they might be packing small peaches one minute and big peaches the next. The machine is very flexible, so while there's small peaches dropping off here, there's also very large peaches dropping off here and it allows us to change it. So within a minute, this could be dropping middle-sized peaches. So we can change where peaches go in a moment's notice.

DePue: Who's controlling all of that?

Eckert: Jerry is up here at the helm right now. He's really the packinghouse manager, but he's got a couple good lead folks, Maria and Huvey(??) are both leads in the packinghouse as well.

DePue: So you said this is Jerry and he's the one who's managing the computer side of the operation?

Eckert: He is at the moment, but we also have two other people that are very capable on this as well. He's responsible for the overall efficiency of the packinghouse.

DePue: He is a migrant himself?

Eckert: No, Jerry's fulltime, year round employee of ours, manager. He also manages our greenhouse.

DePue: Which means it's a requirement for some of you people to speak Spanish I would think.

Eckert: Yes, we all speak a little. It's definitely helpful in the management of the business.

DePue: Okay, what else do we need to see here, Chris?

Eckert: Once the boxes are full, you can see that they're put forward on this conveyer and taken down to the end of the packing line. This one's not quite full yet and we'll go down there and see what they do with them.

DePue: Okay. Chris, what is the market these are destined for?

Eckert: The wholesale boxes, which are the wood grain boxes, those are going to grocery stores. You can't let these do this. You've got to hold them back. This is printing the lot number on them. If it hits this, it won't print it.

DePue: I'm surprised by the variety of different boxes that I see crossing the line here. Is that different quality of peaches and different sizes of peaches you're trying to track?

Eckert: Okay, I'm sorry.

DePue: No I was asking about the different variety of boxes that I see coming across the line.

Eckert: Yes, this is cheese produce. This is what we consider a number two box right here. You having trouble? She's having trouble keeping up. Hold on a second. Hey Jerry. Jerry, she can't keep up down here with these boxes, doing the boxes and the bags. So we're not getting—a bunch of these aren't being labeled.

DePue: Okay, we were talking about the different sizes of boxes and the labeling process here, if you could talk us through that please?

Eckert: Yeah there's different boxes based on whether they're going out wholesale or whether we're selling them retail in our own retail store. So the large boxes that have the wood grain finish on them are going wholesale. That's our wholesale package. The boxes that you see labeled in white, these are pecks and half-peck containers. Those are going to our country store for our own retail use and they do not get labeled down here. They're going to be sold out directly in retail.

DePue: I think I know the answer, but why are we seeing them all intermix like we do?

Eckert: Well the peaches come in randomly sized and our customers buy them randomly out of the retail department. So what ends up happening is we process the fruit as it's needed for our store and our retail business. We pack everything that they pick and so whatever is not needed for retail ends up going into wholesale and there's a lot of different sizes associated with that, sizes of peaches. So smaller peaches are in a different package. Larger peaches are in a different package.

DePue: I just noticed this device you were having some difficulty with earlier is labeling these boxes as they come through?

Eckert: Right, we label each box with the variety name and then a lot that we can identify which block of fruit it came from, what time of the day it was packed and in case we have any trouble we can trace back that package to any type of problem on our end.

DePue: Okay, very good. So it really is computerized now. This is where technology has made a big difference.

Eckert: This is where we've been able to enjoy some more mechanization. You can still see it's a pretty labor intense operation, but we are trying to mechanize as it becomes available. I'm sure you'll see great leaps forward in this as the years progress. Also mechanization comes at a capital expense. So we have to invest a lot of money and new equipment all the time to keep up with those changing mechanical devices.

DePue: Chris, I've got one more question for you and that is I notice that all of the ladies seem to have a pencil stuck in their hair someplace. What's the pencil for?

Eckert: Well two reasons we have a pencil. First one is we identify what package they're packing by a mark. So it's identified on the box what size of fruit it is and where it's going to go in terms of our customer. The second thing is is they initial every box that they pack so that we can create an element of accountability. If we have a problem, we have quality checks in place so that we can go back and talk to a particular person and say, "Hey, you need to do a better job on this," or, "You're doing a good job on this," but it helps with a level of accountability in the packinghouse.

DePue: And one final question, then, for you. The peaches kind of set the pace and it's unforgiving. You can't fight the pace that you're dealing with. Is that a challenge for the workers?

Eckert: It is a challenge because there's a lot of peaches that like to ripen at one time and so you end up getting tired for a few days and then it will loosen up. There won't be so many fruits coming in and then suddenly people are saying, "Hey, we want more hours." So you have to ebb and flow and be flexible and manage your team based on what the crop is dictating and it creates some unique challenges for us.

DePue: Well thank you, Chris, for a close up and an inside view of your packing operation. It's been fascinating and I know we've got more things to see in the farm and we look forward to that.

Eckert: I think we ought to look at how we chill the peaches down completely too in the cold storage. (pause in recording)

DePue: Chris, you were right. It is cold.

Eckert: Yes, we really work very diligently to manage the temperature of the fruit. Peaches are kind of unique in that there's something that we call the kill zone in peaches and it's between the temperatures of fifty-five and thirty-six degrees. A lot of people have had an experience where they go to the grocery store and they have a beautiful peach, looks wonderful, take it home, take a bite out of it and it's mealy and dry and flavorless. That's a result of internal breakdown and there's been a lot of great research done over the past few years in what is really causing that and it's because of storage between the temperatures of thirty-six and fifty-five degrees. So you saw when we bring the fruit out of the orchard, we're going to hydrocool that fruit down to about seventy-five degrees. Then we're going to pack it and then fruit for our country store goes directly over there. It's never chilled completely, but the fruit that goes out in our wholesale market is still not chilled. It's still around that seventy, seventy-five degree range. We bring it into this room, which this room is about thirty-three degrees, but you can see the pallets are large cubes and if we don't really work at it, we're not going to cool the center of that pallet of fruit down. So when we bring them out of the packing house, we bring them in here and we put them on these very large fans and you can see an example of it right over here to my right. These large fans and we stage these up in a tunnel and as you can see there's a cavity down the middle if these pallets right here and what's happening is that fan is actually sucking air through the middle of these pallets, forcing the cold air from the room through the small holes that are designed on the outside of the boxes. So we're forcing the cold air from the outside of the room, through the boxes and we can cool these pallets of peaches down from seventy-five degrees down to about thirty-five degrees in six hours.

DePue: What's your target in terms of how long it's here before it actually gets shipped out to your wholesale market?

Eckert: Well in an ideal world you would pick it, pack it and ship it the same day. Peaches, as you can see, don't always do the ideal thing. So you have to, again, work with the flow of fruit. Now in your cooler is the only kind of governing mechanism you have for your peaches. Last week in this past few days we've been picking very heavily and so we build up a small inventory of fruit in our cold storage and now for the next few days to a week we're going to slow down on our picking. So now we will work out of our inventory over the next week. Typically, we don't want to have peaches more than five to seven days. You have about one week to work through inventory. After that, the quality really starts to deteriorate and you have to go look for secondary markets for your fruit. So it's really to manage the quality, you need to move your inventory out within seven days.

DePue: How far is this fruit going to be shipped?

Eckert: We market most of our fruit in the Missouri, Illinois region. So Chicago is a big market for us. St. Louis is our biggest market, but we go as far away as Minnesota and Iowa, but again, most of it is really pretty much within a couple hundred miles.

DePue: And I notice that you don't have just peaches in here. I saw some banana peppers, some watermelons and cantaloupe behind you.

Eckert: Yes, we utilize this room for storage of more than just peaches because we're getting in large quantities of cantaloupes for our retail market. So we'll store those in here. They come from other local growers, but we also grow banana peppers, green bell peppers, tomatoes. Those are all things that we produce ourselves and we will use this same space to store them.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much. Anything else we need to know about the cold storage side of the operation?

Eckert: I think we're good.

DePue: Thank you very much, Chris.

Eckert: Do you guys want to go see pick your own now? (Pause in recording)

DePue: Chris, well we're here in your garden center. Let's talk a little bit about—I know we're going to talk about the pick your own operation, but talk about some of the other products that you market here as well.

Eckert: Sure. We have a full line specialty food store and a lot of the things that we market are Eckert branded products, not necessarily produce ourselves, but products that we've partnered with other local growers and other local producers because we feel the product is exceptional quality and we'd like to put our name on it. So we've got a lot of complimentary products here for peaches like the peach cake mix and muffin mix. Of course honey is a big product for us being in the apple business and also a lot of Amish products are really good for us, but the apple butter down here you see is a really good product for us. We sell a lot of that. So it's complimentary products to things you think about when you're on a farm and buying apples or buying peaches and want to pick up and take home with you.

DePue: The peach crisp mix, the peach cobbler mix, somebody locally is putting that together for you?

Eckert: There's different suppliers all over, but some of our suppliers are in Georgia. Some of the suppliers are in Ohio; some in Illinois. It just depends on where we feel the best quality comes from.

DePue: What do we have over here in the jars then? Is that some more of your products?

Eckert: Well the corn salsa is from an Amish organization and it's really a great product. We do a great job on selling that and you can see there's a peach salsa even that does

really well for us in summer, for obvious reasons. Our honey comes from a beekeeper here in Illinois and we're very proud of that product. All of our jams and jellies come from a company in Georgia, actually. We found that they have the highest quality flavor wise. So we want to keep our name on that product for sure.

DePue: Why did you decide to get into this aspect of the business as well?

Eckert: The pick your own business?

DePue: Well all of these different products that you're featuring.

Eckert: Well we started retailing in 1910 and at that time it was really an effort to market the products we grew directly to the consumer so we could get a higher margin for the fruits and vegetables from the farm. Over time, that evolved and expanded and even into a full line grocery store. We were an IGA store for forty years right here in Belleville. We got out of the grocery store business just because of all the changes that occurred in the industry over the seventies and eighties and specialized more in produce, bakery and high end specialty grocery and now have expanded into meats and delis and imported cheeses and wine from all over the world. So we're really trying to be more of a specialty food store and cater to people who have more gourmet taste and really want the freshest, highest quality food that you can get.

DePue: And where are you find the market for that? People coming in quite a ways to come here?

Eckert: We see the market's really local. As a farmer on the edge of a metropolitan area, urban sprawl is something that is your friend and your enemy. It makes it more challenging to do farm operations, but it also brings a lot of new people. With rooftops come new shoppers, more traffic, and more competition. So because there's an opportunity with more customers and because we're being pushed by our competitors that move in, you know there's more shopping options for customers in the area. We have to up the ante of our game and provide different products, more unique products, high quality products, great service if we want to stay in business on this farm. If we don't change, we're afraid we're going to become another mom and pop statistic like you read about. So we're trying to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to us and have fun at the same time.

DePue: What do you see as your competition then? Are there other pick your own operations that are close to here?

Eckert: The pick your own business is a unique operation that we do. There's not a lot of competition in that directly, but there's a lot of indirect competition for families looking to spend time with their children on weekends. So our competition is really other entertainment venues. The ballpark, going to see the Cardinals play, going to the zoo, going to Six Flags; those are all competitors in that market and we have a to do a really good job to compete. Entertainment's a tough, tough business and people spend a lot of money to get people to come into their facility and the entertainment

industry. So every year you have to do something new and better and improve your operation if you're going to stay relevant in that business.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much, Chris. (Pause in recording)

Eckert: Well I thought the wagon would be here by now, but we really don't enter our stuff in any competitions, but the Illinois Specialty Growers sell our peaches at their booth at the state fair.

Male: That's not a competition. It's just a showcase. They have free tastings every day. Sampling.

Eckert: No, we've never done that. Hard to say. I've never had yours. We do a homemade salsa here too. That's not our homemade salsa, but we have a lot of Hispanic on our staff, so they make a pretty darn good salsa (break in recording) using home grown tomatoes.

Male: He doesn't?

Eckert: Because there's too much moisture. There's too much water in them.

Male: I ended up draining a lot of that off before I mix it all together.

Eckert: He likes the shipped in tomatoes that are a little drier. Well heck. (pause in recording) Nice picking Laura.

Laura: Well we were up in the last rows of John Boys, but they're gone. We're going to go up here to the Jim Dandy on the last road down. Where we're going tomorrow is anyone's guess.

Eckert: You'll find them. (pause in recording) He's going to turn around right here guys. You might want to back up a little bit.

DePue: Chris, I see we've got the wagon pulling up here for the pick your own side of the operation.

Eckert: Yes, this is a big part of the experience when you come out to pick is riding on a wagon. Most of our customers are coming from the St. Louis metropolitan area. Most of them have never been on a farm before and most of them have never taken a wagon ride before, something I know I take for granted because I grew up on tractors. So this is kind of like our roller coaster. You get on the wagon and you do a little hayride out to the field and it gives you a chance to enjoy time with your family and with your kids. This is really geared towards the whole family coming out and having fun on the farm.

DePue: And they each get their own box and fill the box up and that's part of the overall price I would assume.

Eckert: You get a box when you come out to pick and you take it out to the field. We sell our peaches by the pound, so we weigh the peaches when they come back in. Of course we always tell everyone we're willing to buy everyone a free lunch because you can eat all the fruit you want to while you're out there.

DePue: This is a Thursday and it still seems to be a pretty good crowd for you.

Eckert: Yes, pick your own peaches, it's a fun thing. It's not as popular as pick your own apples simply because the weather's not as conducive in the summer as in the fall, but nonetheless, it's still a very popular business for us.

DePue: What's it like on the weekends?

Eckert: We'll have upwards of 5,000 people here a weekend to a day on the weekends to go pick and pick apples and peaches.

DePue: Would you expect that many this weekend?

Eckert: This weekend is going to be a little slower mainly because it's going to be hot this weekend, so that's going to slow down traffic a little bit, but it will be a good weekend for us.

DePue: And it looks like it's the whole family. Grandparents bring their grandkids out, the whole thing?

Eckert: Yes, this is a multi-generational business and our mission of our business is to create family memories and this is a wonderful opportunity to create some really great memories with your kids and have a good time on the farm.

DePue: I imagine they bring their cameras along as well.

Eckert: We're very fortunate that we're in a lot of Christmas cards. The picture of the family in front of the tree or in front of the pumpkin or with a box of fruit. So we love that part of the business.

DePue: I know you have Christmas tree stands out here as well. Do the people come out here in the summertime, scoping out the tree they want a few months later?

Eckert: I don't know how many people are actually scoping out their trees, but that is another part of our business. While it's not as popular as peach and apple season, we do grow Christmas trees and you come out and we give you a saw and you cut it down yourself and we bring it in here and bale it for you and take it home and set it up.

DePue: Okay, well let's go out to the fields and watch a little bit of that. (pause in recording) Chris, one of the comments you made earlier really stuck with me. You mentioned the word entertainment and I wasn't expecting to hear that.

Eckert: Well we're really in the entertainment business. We're not in the business of selling fruit as much as creating memories for families because I don't think people come here because they can get a bargain on fruit. I think people come here because they want to have a really neat experience with their kids and spend a day on a farm and show them something that a lot of people don't see any more, an actual working farm and how fruit is harvested and it's not actually coming from a factory in town. It comes from a tree and there's a process that these trees go through every year in order to produce a nice crop of fruit. It's also a connection to the history of the land and where things came from and it's an educational process for a family as well. So we love that portion of our business and love seeing the families come out and take pictures by the tree or with a basket full of fruit and send that out in a Christmas card or whatever, put that on their websites and post it on their blogs. It's really heartwarming to see that we can be a part of that.

DePue: How long have you been doing the pick your own side of the operation?

Eckert: We started pick your own apples in 1965. So we've been doing it over forty years now. We were one of the first farms in the United States to start doing pick your own and it is a big part of our business today and in fact today, Eckert's is the largest pick your own fruit operation in North America.

DePue: Doing it that long, I would imagine you see people coming back who remember when they were little kids and are brining now their kids.

Eckert: Absolutely. We see a lot of that. We see a lot of multi-generation families that had their history with their parents and now they're bringing their kids out to do the same thing and that makes a lot of it worthwhile to be a part of that story.

DePue: Well so far we've been spending a lot of time on peaches. Let's look at some other aspects of your operation.

Eckert: Okay. (pause in recording)

DePue: Chris, we've got a beautiful view here. Tell us what we're looking at.

Eckert: Well we're kind of on the top of the farm here and kind of looking out over the landscape and seeing several of the crops that we produce here on our farm.

DePue: Why don't you start up on your left, if you would?

Eckert: Up on the top of the hill you can see we have a small vineyard up there. It's a little experimental vineyard that I put in a few years ago and we're growing some wine grapes up there. Then coming in front of that you can see a planting of squash and gourds for our fall decoration and for fall sales. Then if you pan on around, you can see in the distance the subdivisions that are starting to encroach upon the farm and as we were talking about, there's both pros and cons associated with the influx of population around the farm. Then directly behind me, here, is one of our apple orchards and these apples that we're growing over here are all for pick your own. We

don't wholesale any of our apple crop. So we bring people up in the wagons from the stand down below and they come out here and harvest the crop. This is a big part of our business. That's the busiest time of year for us. Then off in the distance, behind the apples, you can see some of our Christmas trees that we grow and we have a cut your own Christmas tree farm and behind the Christmas trees you can see a peach orchard, just a small little sliver of the peach orchard and that's a pick your own peach orchard in the distance there as well. So lots of diversity in crops and so forth and we also have other growing areas where we have tomatoes and peppers and strawberries and blackberries.

DePue: And we do want to get a shot of that just a little bit later as well. If we could swing over to the left, I see an old building through the apple trees.

Eckert: As I said, this farm has been in my family since the 1870s. It was my great-great-grandfather, Henry Clay Eckert, who married Mary Miller. This was a Miller Farm originally and her father gave the farm to her—we better get out of the road (pause in recording).

DePue: Chris, as we said before, it's a working operation. So we just saw an example of that, but you're looking at this farmhouse that you were telling us about.

Eckert: Yes, in the 1870s, Henry Clay Eckert, my great-great-grandfather married Mary Miller and this farm was a Miller Farm and he and his wife were given the property by her parents and they continued the farming operation from there. The brick home over there was built in 1880 by Henry and his wife and they lived in it their entire life and raised their family there and then his son, Alvin Eckert, also lived in that home and raised his family in that house. So it's been two generations of family members that were raised in that brick home.

DePue: We're going to hear a lot more about the family history in a little bit. Tell us a little bit about the variety of apple you've got here.

Eckert: Well there's several varieties of apples. Unlike peach trees that are self-pollinating, apple trees need to be cross-pollinated. So we like to plant blocks of apple trees in alternating varieties. So we are looking right here at Fuji apples and they are alternating with some Jonathan and some Honey Crisp apples. So there's three different varieties planted in this block and then we bring in bees that assist us in pollination because the bees scurry around from flower to flower looking for nectar and in the process of harvesting their nectar, they get their hairy legs pollenized by the pollen on the flowers and they take that from one tree to the next and just by luck, they are pollinating the apples as they go forging for nectar.

DePue: But it's not a problem that they're taking pollen from one variety to another variety of tree?

Eckert: They have to. Apples have to be cross-pollinated, meaning that if you had an entire field of Golden Delicious apples, you would not generate any apples because you need to have pollen from a different variety of apple or crab apple in order to make a

viable fruit. So we have to take pollen from Golden Delicious to Red Delicious or Jonathan and mix it up so you have a productive orchard.

DePue: (Pause in recording) Chris, I notice also on these apple trees here, just like the peaches, they tend to be on the small side, at least it looks like that to me. Is that deliberate?

Eckert: Yes. With apple trees, we have moved toward a higher density style of production and what that really translates into is dwarf style trees. Apple trees are a little different than peach trees in that you can control the overall size of the tree by putting it on a different route stalk. So the route system of these apple trees are totally different than the top half of the tree, whereas the top half of the tree might be a Golden Delicious or a Fuji or a Honey Crisp apple, the root stalks are completely independent of that and what they do in the nursery is they fuse the top half with a root stalk and the root stalk is really what's responsible for controlling the overall height of the tree and the top section is what's responsible for controlling the variety of apple it produces. So you put those two together and you come up with a planting system that has more trees that are smaller and we like smaller trees because it's better in a pick your own business to get access to fruit when it's closer to the ground. It's also a more productive style of apple production than the old standard style apple trees that were forty feet tall and you had to use ladders to harvest and they were hard to control disease and insects.

DePue: And we also saw—you were talking about the development earlier on that seems to be encroaching and you said there were pluses and minuses to that. I'd like to have you elaborate on that, if you could.

Eckert: Well the obvious plus to many farmers is that you have inflated land values, which is good and allows you to do other things that maybe you wouldn't be able to do, but it also creates a lot of burdens because not a lot of people who build houses in the country like to have the equipment and the noise and the dust and the dirt that goes along with agriculture. They like the ambience of agriculture and the serenity of living in the countryside, but they don't want all the other stuff that comes along with that to get a production farm in existence. So we're striking a balance between living with a lot of neighbors and also being able to produce our crops and I think the long term is that—as most farmers find in the edge of the urban areas—is that you're going to have to end up having to move somewhere down the road just because it doesn't make economic sense to continue to farm property that is so valuable and you have more opportunities if you were to sell this piece of property and develop three times as many acres for your farming operation somewhere else. So that's kind of the sad part of agriculture, although we are really working as hard as we can to delay that process and take advantage of having more people close by. We can generate more dollars from our pick your own business and our retail business, which allows us to stay on this farm longer and longer, but at the same time we know that probably long term we're going to be farming in other spots.

DePue: Does it change the nature of experience for you pick your own customers when they come out here?

Eckert: We hear that occasionally that, "We're not in the country anymore. There's so much traffic. There's houses everywhere," but it's pretty easy to escape it on this big a piece of property too and having hills and especially in an orchard. When you get inside the orchard a couple rows, you don't hear those sounds and all that disappears. So I think, for the most part, is not a problem for us.

DePue: Twenty years from now, standing in the same place, what do you think we might find?

Eckert: I think you'll find houses (laughs), unfortunately, but we're working now to devise plans on what are the priorities of the farming operation and what property is going to go first, second, third, fourth, so that we can continue for as long as possible to farm this property and still make good economic decisions.

DePue: Okay, I think we've got one more location we want to set up on and that would be overlook some of the vegetables and other crops that you've got. (pause in recording) Chris, we've relocated once again and we're pretty close back to your home base of operation, but obviously looking at what to me looks like plain, old fashioned corn.

Eckert: Well it kind of looks that way, but this in fact is Indian corn and we grow our own Indian corn that we use primarily for fall decoration and retailing to our customers that come for pumpkin pick your own and they take it home and put it on their homes to decorate the house for Halloween.

DePue: That's strictly marketed in your stores here?

Eckert: Yes. We don't wholesale any of these crops. These are all for our own retail use.

DePue: Is this harvested the same way that any field of corn would be?

Eckert: Absolutely not. This is all hand harvested. We come through and shuck the ears off and then you peel the husk back and tie it. It's all done by hand because you want to preserve all of the kernels on the cob and all of the husk on the cob as well.

DePue: Let's go ahead and swing around and as we swing around we'll see several of the other plants that you have here on the farm.

Eckert: Yes, in the background you can see a field of green. That is actually a pumpkin patch that's planted into plastic beds that were also our strawberry crop earlier this year. So we get two crops off of the same field in one year.

DePue: Is that the one that we see just short of the road?

Eckert: Yes. It's just behind the tomatoes.

DePue: Okay, so it's in front of that plowed area?

Eckert: Yes and that will be harvested this fall for our retail use up at the country store and then on this side of the pumpkin patch you can see our vegetable patch and most of this is tomatoes. We have about somewhere in the neighborhood of 5,000 to 6,000 tomato plants. These tomatoes are sold exclusively through our country store and we have tomatoes available from about Fourth of July all the way up until the frost. Then next to the tomatoes you can see we've got some peppers. We grow banana peppers, both sweet and hot, and green bell peppers here and those are also used for our own retail here at the country store.

DePue: My experiences with peppers, especially with hot peppers versus regular bell peppers, you don't want to get them too close. Is that not a problem?

Eckert: (Laughs) Because they'll get the other one hot?

DePue: Yes.

Eckert: Well, honestly, we're kind of new in this. So we probably could learn a little from you, but we typically don't grow much hot peppers just because our customer base is not really seeking hot peppers. They're seeking mild peppers, so most of what you see out here is just strictly mild.

DePue: And all of what we're looking at here is picked by?

Eckert: Hand. These are all hand-harvested crops and our crew comes out here about once every two or three days and harvests the patch.

DePue: But it's not pick your own.

Eckert: Not pick your own, no.

DePue: Any reasoning why this wouldn't be a pick your own experience?

Eckert: Primarily because there's not enough demand to make it worthwhile. We've got more demand for peaches and apples and we do do pick your own blackberries, but the tomatoes and peppers are not enough demand for a pick your own crop there.

DePue: And we're obviously too late for the strawberries, but I'm guessing the strawberries is a pick your own operation as well.

Eckert: Yes it is. We have a lot of pick your own strawberries.

DePue: Anything else that we need to be aware of here? I see the irrigation system that you've got.

Eckert: You can see that there's plastic beds and we call this plastic culture type of production. So there's a raised bed of dirt and then that bed is covered with plastic

mulch is what they call it, but it's just black plastic. So you can't get any rain water into the plant and as a result they're very much dependent on irrigation. So you can see there's a header pipe and under each row of black plastic, there's a little trickle pipe that goes along there to water the plants and it also delivers the fertilizer to the plants. The plastic is very helpful for a couple reasons. One is it warms the soil early in the year so you can get your plants started earlier. The second thing and most importantly is its weed control. So we really don't have to use any herbicides on this field whatsoever and those of you who've grown tomatoes and peppers in the past and strawberries, especially, know what a challenge it is to keep weeds out of that type of a plant because they're right next to the ground and the weeds get mixed in. You cannot get them out very easily.

DePue: So the tradeoff is your own irrigation, but the plus side is you can regulate the amount of fertilizer it gets then.

Eckert: Yes and the other tradeoff is it's a lot more expensive. So you have to save it in labor and production. So you make a big investment upfront, but thus far it's really proven to be worth the investment.

DePue: How long have you been doing the vegetable side of the operation?

Eckert: We've been doing tomatoes for about five or six years. Peppers, on the other hand, this is really our first venture into peppers.

DePue: So it's all pretty new then.

Eckert: Yes, relative to growing apples for 150 years, this is new.

DePue: (Laughs) And strawberries, how long have you been doing those?

Eckert: We've been growing strawberries for a long time; probably fifty or sixty years.

DePue: And blackberries?

Eckert: Blackberries, we've been growing blackberries for about twenty years.

DePue: So it seems that over the years you're adding new things. What's on the horizon for that?

Eckert: Well, wine grapes (laughs). You saw up there.

DePue: Making your own wine?

Eckert: No, there's no plans for a winery at this point in time, but we all really enjoy wine, so it's kind of a personal passion of ours.

DePue: And I heard you mention that you take some of the peaches and that gets turned into wine as well.

Eckert: Yes, we've partnered with a local winery in Missouri, Montelle Winery, and they're a great group of folks that really do a good job on wine. They approached us about ten years ago about starting a peach wine. So now we take all of our peaches over to them and they make a really nice peach wine that is widely distributed in Missouri and Illinois.

DePue: Well Chris, you've got a very impressive operation. It seems like it's been growing over the years incredibly. It diversified over the years. You're finding new markets as you go down the road and finding new ways to I guess overcome the challenges that every farmer has to face anymore. So thank you very much for the experience. It really has been fun for us.

Eckert: Thank you so much.

(end of interview)