

Interview with John Ackerman

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Interviewer: Robert Warren

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Warren: This is December 19, 2007. We're here speaking with John Ackerman at Ackerman Farms near Morton in Tazewell County, Illinois. John, could you give us your full name?

Ackerman: My name is John Harley Ackerman.

Warren: And your age and date of birth?

Ackerman: Forty-six years old. I was born on 1/6/61.

Warren: Where were you born?

Ackerman: I was born in Peoria, in a hospital there.

Warren: And could you tell us a little bit about your immediate family: your father, mother, and siblings?

Ackerman: My father was Clyde Ackerman; my mother was Margaret. They're both deceased. I have one sister, Debbie Lee, who lives up on a farm near Toluca, Illinois.

Warren: And your dad was a farmer here on the Ackerman Farms property, is that correct?

Ackerman: Right. I believe he was born right here, I think in this room we're sitting in.

Warren: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents?

Ackerman: My parents were some of the most brilliant people I ever knew. My dad was a great wit and a brilliant man—Bronze Tablet, University of Illinois. My mother was a school teacher for over seventeen years, I believe. I had wonderful parents—very blessed to have had the parents that I have had.

- Warren: Where did your mom teach?
- Ackerman: Mom taught in Tremont and Morton, I believe.
- Warren: Middle school, high school?
- Ackerman: I think second and third grade, mostly. And still, to this day, I will meet some of her students, and they'll say, "Oh, we loved your mother; she was our favorite teacher."
- Warren: And how about your grandparents?
- Ackerman: I never knew my grandfather; he passed away before I was born. I knew my grandmother. She lived in town here, and I saw her fairly regularly.
- Warren: What were their names?
- Ackerman: Louise Ackerman was my grandmother, and John H. was my grandfather.
- Warren: We talked to your Uncle Ray this morning, and he talked about a number of relatives that lived nearby. Are there still relatives in the vicinity?
- Ackerman: Yeah, absolutely. We always tease that Noah Ackerman got off the ark and landed here near Morton. (interviewer laughs) There's a lot of family in this area. There was some family that settled here in the 1800s, and a lot of the farm families didn't travel too far—kind of settled in the area. So we have family reunions that'll have quite a few people in them.
- Warren: You said you were born in Peoria. Were your parents living in Peoria in the time?
- Ackerman: No, no, just at the hospital there. My parents were living here at the time.
- Warren: So you grew up on this farm?
- Ackerman: Grew up here, yep.
- Warren: Tell us about your childhood.
- Ackerman: I had a great farm experience growing up. We had hogs and cattle, growing up, so I was in 4-H and FFA. We had steers for projects for many years. I had a few of my own hogs I raised up, partly to earn money for college for later, but partly because that was the kind of experience our parents wanted us to have. We had horses. We didn't have chickens back then. We added those recently to the farm. Just the general farm experience. We put up hay; we picked corn. We had corn, soybeans, alfalfa—just a very common type of farm, I think, for central Illinois.
- Warren: Did you have chores as a kid that you did every day?

Ackerman: Sure, absolutely. And you know, I had various jobs, from taking care of the hogs to feeding and watering. Of course, we had to take care of our own horses and our own show cattle. So yeah, it kept us fairly busy.

Warren: And how about friends? Did you have friends down the road or in town?

Ackerman: Yeah, we had a lot of town friends. It was interesting growing up. I feel like I grew up through a lot of the transition times. I mean, I guess every era in agriculture has its transitions, but there's been so many farms that have gone by the wayside, so many fewer and fewer farmers. So I felt like I was maybe the exception, being the farm kid, even though we only lived a mile outside of town. I always thought that we had the advantages of both. Right close to town, easy access to everything the town had to offer, but still had the advantages of growing up in the country lifestyle.

Warren: You mentioned you were in both 4-H and FFA?

Ackerman: Mm-hmm.

Warren: Tell us about some of your 4-H projects?

Ackerman: Gosh. I was in 4-H for ten years. I was involved in our club pretty heavily and our county federation. I was even 4-H King one time, which to me, looking back, seems pretty funny. For projects, I had cattle every year, and then various projects I picked up just because. One year I had cats. I thought that would be fun—to have a cat for a project. But I concentrated pretty heavily on the cattle.

Warren: What kind of cattle did you guys have?

Ackerman: We have beef cattle out here. My father and I started artificial inseminating the cattle back in the seventies. When I was growing up, we had mostly Hereford cattle. By the time the seventies hit and a lot of people were introducing those European breeds, we started raising a whole bunch of those different breeds. We had a sixty- to eighty-head cow herd. We artificially inseminated most of them. A lot of work, but you're able to really introduce a lot of good genetics in your cattle herd. And then we would raise out our calves, and so on. We would have them fattened for market.

Warren: And how about churches here growing up? Did you go to church in town?

Ackerman: I grew up raised in the Morton United Methodist Church here. My mom taught Sunday School there; my dad was pretty active in the church. Years went by. I think my attendance when I was in college wasn't so good, but now that I have a family, I've been really active in the church and a lot of committees. I'm on our building committee. We're building a new church that you can see right out this window. They're going to build a half-mile from the house here. So it's wonderful, really; it's the fruition of a lot of years' work to

try to get the land purchased, the building paid for. I'm a lay speaker in our church now, so I get to preach about once a year. And it's good to see my kids growing up in the same church I grew up in.

Warren: How about schools? Where'd you start out in school?

Ackerman: Well, I went to Lincoln Elementary here. As a matter of fact, there was so many children in my class—ours was one of the largest classes—after kind of the baby boom from years back. My sister's class—my sister's a couple years older than I—and my class were over 300, so they had to build another school. My kindergarten was actually held in my own church's basement. In my first grade class, I was the first year they ever attended our school, the same school that now my children are going through. At that time there were corn fields on three sides of the school; now there isn't a corn field within a mile of the school. (laughs) After grade school it was junior high, then it was high school. The junior high building I went to was originally the high school building that my dad and my uncle attended. From there, it was Illinois Central College to get my associate's, and I transferred to University of Illinois to get my bachelor's.

Warren: When did you finish up your college?

Ackerman: Graduated in May of '83. I took agricultural economics, and I backgrounded myself in meat sciences and animal husbandry. At one time I really thought it would be a good idea, as long as we had the cow herd. Then we had the feedlot. The next obvious step to me seemed, let's butcher our own cattle. And there are instances of people who have done that. I went to college, I took an independent study course with a professor there, and I did a thirty-five-page thesis that essentially said, no, it wasn't the right thing to do. You just couldn't borrow money back in the eighties at 19 percent interest rate and get a 3 percent return on your money and make a go of it. My professor at the time said to me, "Now you've done all this work. Are you disappointed?" I said, "Well, in a way, yeah, but that's part of education, is to learn what not to do as well as what you can do." It would have been a lot worse had I not gone to all this trouble to learn this, gone ahead with these plans, and ended up ten years later bankrupt for it. So education works both ways.

Warren: How many head of cattle did you have back then?

Ackerman: At that time, we probably had seventy cows, twenty replacement heifers, and maybe sixty-five head in the feedlot from the previous year's calves.

Warren: So when would you set the beginning date of your farming career after you got out of college. Was it pretty soon after you graduated?

Ackerman: Yeah, because I had farmed with Dad while I was going to high school and to junior college. Then I went away for two years to Champaign, Illinois to go to U of I, but I still farmed in the summers. So when I graduated, we had pretty

much planned on me farming full time. Well, the worst time you can start farming is about 1983, I think. They didn't say in any of my textbooks that it wouldn't rain from June until November that year, and they didn't mention it was going to be seventy-four degrees below zero [minimum temperature on December 25th 1983 was -14 degree Fahrenheit] on Christmas Day of that year. (laughs) So it was a rough time to start farming, it really was. It was right after land prices crashed, it was when interest rates were through the roof, and it was a record-setting drought in '83 that year.

Warren: Was that your toughest year, do you think, your first one?

Ackerman: There's been a few, but that one was spectacular. (laughs) In '83 we actually had a little more rain than we did five years later in the drought of '88, but in '83, it started out as a very wet spring. Well, the plant physiologically is set up for a huge yield: big ears, lots of kernels. When the tap was shut off—when it stopped raining—it didn't rain again at all. Well, each of those stalks had already prepared for a big ear; they all aborted. They were barren stalks, one after the other. We used to tease that we'd drive through the field playing "Spot the Ear," (laughs) and we'd drive the combine over to the ear that we saw. So the yields were horrendous. Years later, the drought of '88 hits, except this year, now, it's dry from the get-go. From the spring on, it was dry. And we had less rain in '88 than we did in '83, but since it started dry, every single one of those plants that germinated was set up to produce whatever they could in the conditions they were in. So every one was set up to produce this little nubbin ear. Every stock had that little nubbin ear, and we had to reset the combines to make this work, to pick it efficiently. But we had better yields in '88 than we did in '83.

Warren: Better yields in '88?

Ackerman: Both years were tough years to go through, though; wouldn't want to go through them again. And that year, in '83, after all that drought it was one of the coldest Decembers ever, and we had cattle that were a half-mile out in the field. We had water lines we ran out there that we had to keep unfrozen. We used to feed them pumpkin pulp from the canning factory. The pumpkin pulp was a high moisture content. They'd dump it out in the fields; it would freeze on top. The cattle would eat the food underneath that frozen ledge, and then we had to bundle up, walk a half-mile out there, and we had ledge waiting out there. We'd break off those ledges. The ledges would weigh several hundred pounds, so we'd have to break up the ledges, roll them out of the way, and the cattle would start eating the fresh. Every single day. That year, someone got out of the car, and they died on the property line between ourselves and our neighbors.

Warren: Was that one of your neighbors?

Ackerman: It was no one we knew, but they wandered out of the car, and it was that kind of cold. So it was a tough way to get started farming. And the worst part of that is that's the nature of the game. Financially, if you start kind of behind the eight ball, your growth pattern is always going to be below had you started a little higher. It'll take a lot of years to make up for that. So tough way to get started, really. And I'll tell you that in the same sentence where I say I'm one of the most blessed people I know. I'm living the lifestyle I want to live, I do what I love, I've got my health. So I don't want to say, "Oh, woe is me. This is terrible." But starting out farming in '83 was a tough way to start.

Warren: Could you kind of describe the farm as it was in '83 and compare it with how it is today, in terms of the layout, the buildings you've got, and things you've added since you started?

Ackerman: Well, in '83, there were still a lot of the same buildings that were here when my uncle was growing up on this farm. We still had the corn crib, we still had the barn, we still had the old wooden machine shed, we had cattle, and we had hogs. But in these kind of transition years—in the eighties when we're losing so many farmers and there are so many tough financial decisions to be made—some of the effects were you couldn't afford to put a new roof on a barn that wasn't returning you that much money; you just couldn't afford to do it. So the barn started to go, deteriorate. We were some of the last people to be picking corn instead of combining corn, so we were filling ear corn into the corn crib in the eighties, but the building itself was deteriorating. We were some of the last people—I'm sure the last people in the area—to be putting loose hay up in the hay mow. But it was in that stage where you're still clinging to the old ways, and you're having a tough time making that financial leap to the newer ways. The buildings themselves took a beating. Financially, we were taking a beating at that time.

There started to be a lot of changes. We got rid of the hogs in 1984, I think. It took all day to load those last six semi-wild hogs. (laughs) On a per-hour basis, that's not a quick loading rate. (laughs) But that was the last of the hogs. I kind of wonder if that made Dad sad, because he had been a premier Yorkshire breeder for years. In the fifties, I guess, we had a Chinese delegation come visit the farm because this was a well-known Yorkshire breeding site. Dad won the pen of barrows at the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago in '57. So the farm has seen highs, it has seen lows; probably some of the lows were in the '80s.

Warren: So the pig operation terminated. Did you maintain the beef for a while longer?

Ackerman: We had cattle then for quite a while longer. But the buildings that housed the hogs—there were three hog buildings—they were just left to kind of sit. So the layout has changed because the operation changed. We did keep the cattle until the very late '90s. And then the tough part of that is you always want to sell—people should always buy the week after I sell. (laughs) When we got

out of the cattle business, fat cattle were fifty-six dollars a hundred-weight. It wasn't just a year or two after we got out of the business that they were ninety-three dollars a hundred-weight. But that's the nature of the game; you're going to have that. But it does point out that when you are having those good years, you really got to hold onto that money and invest it wisely. So you can almost really drive your lifestyle out here.

Warren: One of the things that strikes me is the fact that—I think it's still true—it's the farm with 160 acres, I remember, quite a few years ago. Is it still that size, or has it grown?

Ackerman: Well, what we call the home farm now: my wife and I own the 100 acres here, my sister and I own the adjacent forty acres together, and my uncle owns the next forty acres to that. So really, the home place is about 100 acres—or I should say it's eighty acres and a shared forty—would be more accurate. So the boundaries haven't left the immediate family yet, but as the years and generations go by, the ownership kind of expands, if you will. The home place isn't really a large enough farm to support a big family, not by itself, or at least not the way we had been farming.

Warren: So what have you tried to do to accommodate that?

Ackerman: Well, that's the transition that we are really in now. When it finally became obvious that we weren't going to be able to have a decent income on the home farm plus another 160 I rent—between the cash rent, the crop share, and the home place—we started looking at what can we do. I did sell long-term care insurance for like six months because I thought, “Well, I got to get an off-the-farm job,” which so many other farmers have done. But my heart was really still here, and we thought, “Now, what can you do on a small acreage?” That's where I think a lot of farmers make that split. You either get larger, or you get out, or you find some niche that can keep you farming. Well, that's what we've tried to do now. When we started out, we tried numerous things. We tried to sell fresh-cut flowers. Didn't really pan out so well. Our farm is wedged between an interstate highway and old US Highway 150. Cars go by at sixty miles an hour. It's always been a liability, we thought. You lose pets, you worry about your kids, you can't pull out with farm machinery without some danger. We started saying, “Well, how can we turn that into an asset?” Well, if we can take that traffic count and get them to stop here, if we can open up our farm to the public, what's going to make it worth their while, and how can we make this work for us? Fresh-cut flowers didn't work. Sweet corn didn't really work, at least that time we tried it. It's hard to get people to stop when they're driving by at that kind of speed.

I've been raising pumpkins off and on for the local Libby's canning factory. The pumpkins that get out of the field down the vines, I'm supposed to put them back in the field by hand so that mechanically, they can be picked up by the harvesting machine. I didn't get out there in time, and there were seventy,

eighty, ninety pumpkins that weren't harvested. And I thought, "Well, that's a shame." So I loaded them up on a pickup, and just for fun, I set them out in the front yard. I thought my kids would get a kick out of that. But people began to stop and say, "Hey, are those for sale?" And boy, that planted the seed of an idea then. So the next year, we had an acre and a quarter of ornamental pumpkins—twenty different varieties. People began to stop. We made a little bit of money that year. The next year, we had five and a half acres. The year after that, we had eight and a half acres. This past year, we had thirty-one and a half acres of hand-picked ornamental pumpkins, 150 different varieties. It's really growing into a sustainable business.

Warren: You mentioned the Libby canning factory. Where is that factory?

Ackerman: It's right actually in the middle of Morton, there. It's what gives us our claim to Morton being the pumpkin capital of the world. Eighty-five to 90 percent of all the canned pumpkins in the world are canned right here in Morton. So we have a pumpkin festival; we have a pumpkin parade. The community has been really supportive of us doing this, because now we have a pumpkin farm that's closely tied to Morton. So everybody's been really supportive of the changes we've made. We've really tried to clean up the farm after kind of the bad years where things really deteriorated. There's still a long way to go. There's still a lot of old equipment. It just takes a lot of time to clean up the old cement that's in the wrong places. We're really going through those changes, but it seems to be we're headed the right direction.

Warren: Well, you've done a lot of work on the house. We've seen part of the house. Can you talk just a little bit about what you've done to the house itself?

Ackerman: Yeah, it's been a labor of love. It's a grand house; it really is. It's got a lot of character, but like any house—it takes a lot of work—and particularly an old house. There were a lot of things that had never been touched. There was a lot of plumbing that had never been changed from the time it was first put in. There's still some of the old knob-and-tube wiring that's in the house. But we've really learned a lot about home fix-up. We've done a lot of it ourselves. We do it as we're able to afford doing it. Given another few years, I think we'll have things finally set up pretty nicely.

Warren: And the building where you have your shop, now could you talk a little bit about that?

Ackerman: Sure. One of those hog buildings, then, that sat unused was a really nicely put-together farrowing house. It was built about 1960. My dad had it built—state of the art at the time. Super-insulated, electric floor heat, and it went well with that Yorkshire business; that's where the sows farrowed. Well, after we got out of the hog business, it sat. When we started doing pumpkins, we found out that if it rained on a Saturday and you don't have any indoor facilities, it really cuts into your sales. So we cleaned up that building. There were seven tons of

dried manure we pulled out of there, one wheelbarrow at a time. We got it cleaned out, and we used it for storage the first year.

But then we thought, “Well, this is growing, and what are people asking for? What do they want us to do?” After the first year we had pumpkins, people said, “You ought to have mums.” [chrysanthemums] So the next year we raised 1,200 mums, and it’s kind of grown that way ever since. People said, “Why don’t you have apple trees?” So now we’ve planted over 1,500 apple trees. We always tease if someone says, “You ought to have a rhinoceros,” we’d have a rhinoceros out here. (laughter) But nonetheless. People said, “You ought to have a gift shop.” And we kept thinking, “How can we turn this long, low building into a functional gift shop?” Well, my wife said, “Why don’t we just raise it up?” And that’s what we did. We raised it up and put blocks under it, steam-cleaned it out. It’s been our gift shop ever since, and it’s worked really well as component of our pumpkin farm here.

Warren: And what’s the truck sitting out in front of the—?

Ackerman: That old truck, if you look at it closely, it says, “Morton, Illinois” on the side. That was my dad’s uncle’s truck. It sat in a barn not a half-mile from here for about forty years. I farmed that property for my cousins for years, and they gave it to me as a gift. So my goal is someday get that thing running, be able to go into town, have a Dairy Queen, maybe make it home. (laughter)

Warren: Do you know what kind of a truck it is?

Ackerman: I believe a 1928 International.

Warren: Wow.

Ackerman: Yeah. And the motor’s not stuck, so there’s still hope here.

Warren: So today, your fields and pastures, you’ve got pumpkins and mums and apples. Do you still raise grains? Corn, soybeans?

Ackerman: Yeah, by and large, it really has been corn and beans for most of the years I’ve been farming, up until now that we’ve started our pumpkin operation. The alfalfa hasn’t been raised on this farm in quite a while. We’ve platted up the pastures, gosh, probably fifteen years ago. So corn and beans were kind of the name of the game. With the Farm Program, it was so important not to give up that corn base. Once you’re in the program, you stay in the program. Now, we’re at the point where we’re kind of going back the other way. Now we’ve replanted apple orchards; they haven’t been on this farm in years and years. We’ve considered grapes and other options. Even though there’s still a lot of corn and beans—that’s the primary rotation—now we’re looking at: do we want to go back to having alfalfa and doing some of those niche crops. We’ve planted more wheat. It hasn’t been really advantageous to plant wheat up until the last few years, but now wheat seems to be doing well. So we’ve

diversified into a lot of small fields, but that way, if something goes poorly on one crop, we seem to go okay on the other crops.

Warren: How about the labor demands of raising pumpkins versus planting corn? Are there differences there?

Ackerman: It's huge. It really is huge. The hand-picked pumpkins, I think. Some years ago, when we had maybe seventeen acres of pumpkins, we estimated that we had picked 13,000 full-sized ornamental pumpkins—by hand. And we handled each one three times: we put them on the hay rack, we wash them, we take them off the hay rack and display them, and we help people put them in their cars. So it's very labor-intensive. We've used a lot of teenage help. A lot of people come and go. A lot of kids have learned to drive cars out here. The labor part for the farm end of it is difficult enough. When you add the gift shop, and now you employ full-time workers, all of a sudden we make that jump to, you have to fill out W-2 forms, and you have to pay your taxes for all these workers. The paperwork has skyrocketed. So every time we move that next step forward, there's a great deal more paperwork and labor to cover, bookkeeping. It's not as simple as it was. I miss the simplicity. I miss the days where you know, you'd hire a guy, and you'd pay him cash at the end of the day, and you'd see him the next day. Those days are gone. There are a lot of rules, regulations to follow. There's a lot of zoning laws that we ran into. Once we started the gift shop, we've made that transition from just agriculture to agriculture and commercial, so now the zoning came in and said, "You've got to change your driveway." Thirty-five hundred dollars later, I've got an entranceway that meets their approval. And on it goes. Health department came out and said, "Gosh, you've got a petting zoo. We need hand-washing stations; we need this and that, and you've got to cover those things." And they're expensive. So there's a cost to this. So the simplicity, not as much. Still love the lifestyle, still love the people coming out and being happy, and meeting them and hearing their stories. That's the best part.

Warren: I don't know if you mentioned. When was it when you built the gift shop?

Ackerman: Let's see. We opened up our farm to the public in 1999, and it was probably three years into it before we had the gift shop ready to go.

Warren: And the petting zoo. Did that come in about the same time?

Ackerman: Well, we'd always had a few animals around. You know, we had our horses, we had a few cattle kind of left over, more as pets than anything, and people seemed to really enjoy that. About that time my daughter started raising chickens for her 4-H project and making a little money on the side with eggs, and people just were fascinated by that. That connection to being on the farm seems so removed now—you know, a generation or so off—but people just gravitate to, "Oh, I remember this. I grew up this way" or "My grandparents' farm was like this." We recognize that, and we enjoy that. So we have gotten

animals that seemed to fit well. The goats—we never had goats on this farm—we love the goats; they're a lot of fun, and people love them. We have all kind of poultry out here, now. They're just beautiful, and people think it's wonderful.

Warren: And those are the two main species?

Ackerman: Chickens, ducks, turkeys, peacocks, pheasants, goats, a miniature horse, full-sized horse...that's the most of it.

Warren: And the corn maze: is that something that's newer still, or when did that come in?

Ackerman: This is the end of our second year for corn maze. We had resisted some of these things because we didn't want to be a cookie-cutter agritainment type of farm. You know, everybody has their things they like, and we've tried very hard to only do the things on this farm that we either like or we think other people, at least, will enjoy. So when we did our corn maze, we said, "We're not real thrilled with one of these big events; that's fine for some people, if they want to do a sixteen-acre maze and spend the entire day with that, that's wonderful." But we thought, "Well, ours is more of a family-oriented farm, so let's do one where you'd want to take your children in." So we have a four-acre corn maze. We planted the corn crossways, north and south and east and west.

Warren: So it's dense.

Ackerman: It's dense, and it's a grid pattern. My artist drew designs on it. I'd walk out in the field, and I'd say, "Three steps left, four to the right," and I'd stomp that corn, then I'd mow it down. It was a fascinating process, but the best part is, people walk into it, and they spend twenty to forty minutes, and when they walk out, they're still smiling; they had a good time. So they think it's fun, so I think we're on the right track on that.

Warren: Not to expose any trade secrets, but when do you stomp the corn down? When it's head high or when it's...?

Ackerman: When you should do it is when it's six inches high. (laughs) When I got around to it the first year, it was already over my head. Never again. (both laugh) That was the worst thing ever. When it's July and the corn's already over your head, you have missed the golden opportunity. (both laugh)

Warren: So you think you'll keep doing that?

Ackerman: I think so. The response has been good. I mean, we dip our toe into the market, and sometimes we make mistakes. The first year we did mums, we raised 1,200; we had no idea how many to raise. And we raised them

ourselves from cuttings, we pot them ourselves, we water and fertilize here. We sold out of them before they bloomed, even. We thought, “Wow, well we didn’t even touch the market here.” So the next year, we raised 4,800. Well, that was way more than our operation could handle at that time. So in order to sell these, we had to go to flea markets and like the Spoon River Tour and places like that. And it’s difficult to physically move full-blown mums in quantity. So there’s mistakes along the way, and they tend to be doozies; then you got to work your way out of them. So now we raise maybe 3,000 mums a year, and we’re pretty comfortable with that. This year, we pretty much sold out, so that’s good.

Warren: Can you go through the mum-raising process? Do you have a greenhouse, or how do you do that?

Ackerman: No. We do get our starts about the size of your little finger. They’re rooted cuttings. They arrive either in late May or early June. We have pots ready to go with a soilless mix and some time-release fertilizer. We usually bring the youth group out from church. One year we had eighteen kids pot thirty-three mums in three hours. (laughs) It was like Lucy in the chocolate factory: as soon as one would go, they’d pass it to the next one, who’d be waiting to go, and it’d just be piling up, and off they go. We had three hayracks running to move these things various places. We had a tractor to start with, and we got rid of the tractor because it was in the way. We had enough kids that at any one time, there was always a hayrack in motion. And they’d be potted, watered, planted, fertilized, and set in the place they were going to grow, and then around they came. It was just amazing.

Warren: And where from the house, which direction, do you have those?

Ackerman: Well, now, the way we used to do it originally was incredibly labor-intensive, which was go plow furrows out in the field and set them in the ground. It makes for a very good mum—their roots grow right out through the bottom of the pot, and they get that buffer of nutrients and moisture—but it’s extraordinarily labor-intensive. So we’ve really tweaked our management to the point where we can grow what we hope is a really spectacular mum right out here in the old feedlots. It’s close by; we can tend to them quite a bit. It’s still labor-intensive. There’s a Wal-Mart that’s a mile and a half from here. We don’t want to be a mum that looks like you’d buy at a large chain; we want to have a mum that’s spectacular, that you can’t get anywhere else. So that’s what we try to do. And even something as simple as pumpkins. Everybody said, “Well, a pumpkin’s a pumpkin.” Well, maybe. (laughs) But if we provide a type of pumpkin that you’ve never seen before, or one that you think is just beautiful, or you saw that in a magazine and you can’t get it anywhere else. That’s the people we want to be. So it’s worth your time to come out here. You feel like, boy, it’s been worth your trip. You walk away with a smile on your face and happy with what you’ve purchased here, and

then we're satisfied that we've done the right thing. There's a great deal of satisfaction in that.

Warren: So where do all those different varieties of gourds and pumpkins come from?

Ackerman: We get seed from every continent except Antarctica. We do research, we talk to other growers, we get commercial seed catalogues, we get on the Internet. We search out seed anywhere we can. We've had people stop at the farm who will tell me about a pumpkin I'd never seen, and I will ask them to send me seed back. So it's a labor of love, and it's fun to be that deeply involved in just one singular type of plant. It's like Christmas when you go out in the field. When the vines are covered over, you can't really see the fruit. You know you planted it in a certain spot, you know it's supposed to look to a certain way, but when it gets down to it, it's when you pull back those leaves and you find whatever is there is there. Maybe you thought you were going to find a nice, flat, red pumpkin, and it turns out you've got a huge white pumpkin there. It's Christmas. And there you go. And you load that up and bring home. There's something to be said about the raising of beauty. Hopefully as the farm gets cleaned up and as people come out here, they'll say, "Oh, that's beautiful, that's worthy, that's something worthwhile." So they can make it work for us and we can make it work for them.

Warren: Let's see. You talked about pumpkins and gourds and mums. And is there something else I've forgotten that you're also doing? (both talking) hay rack rides?

Ackerman: We do. We do a lot of school tours. This last year, in '07, we just finished up doing about 2,700 children. They each get a front-yard talk, they get a hayrack ride out in the field, and then we have microphones set up so they can hear me give a little talk about the pumpkins. Then they get to see the animals. We let them pet a chicken, and we let them pet a baby goat. And they get a gift: a small pumpkin and a pencil and a coloring book. So that's kind of the standard field trip for schools and such.

Warren: Are they here in the summertime, or spring, fall...?

Ackerman: Actually, we're open to the public very seasonally, so about that third week of August, when those first mums are blooming, is about when we open up. That's when we'll start to get our first pumpkins and squash, too. And that's about the time they start booking. It goes extremely fast, and they loaded up a lot of trips in a hurry—all through September—just one after another. We have two other ladies that help me do field trips this year because of that many kids.

Warren: So you hire people to come in and help?

Ackerman: Yeah.

Warren: I was looking on your website last night, which is a pretty interesting website. It's got an orange background—seems appropriate. Can you tell us about your website? How did you develop that?

Ackerman: Well, we worked with friends of ours who do the websites for us, and they kind of walked us through the process. So I wasn't heavily involved with personally doing the mechanics of it, but we provided them with pictures. They said, "Look, here's a layout that seems like it should work." We've been happy with it, but you really have to adapt to the new technologies. It's so easy to put up a website one year, and then you realize a year later that there are things that are no longer applicable. You've got to keep on top of these things. So it's a good thing. It's the way the world... People really click on that computer now to find you, but it seems so removed from the ins and outs of picking pumpkins. (laughter)

You asked me about crops and things we tried out here. In '05, we attempted to do strawberries, in kind of a big way. We did about three acres of strawberries; well, it was two and a quarter acres of strawberries. It was, according to another nearby grower, the worst year in thirty years to raise strawberries. So we took it on the chin. We had maybe 5 percent of a normal crop. We in no way covered our expenses. We even tried to hold them over for another year, but in '05, there was drought, and a record-setting freeze on May third and fourth of that year took out the blossoms. The drought took out the plants themselves. We took a real beating on that. It'll take a year or two or three of good years to kind of make up for that. We may do it again sometime. But it really points out, you know, you can add enterprises, and on paper, it's great, but that timing thing can make you or break you. So bad luck on that. Will we do it in the future? I don't know; we might. But that was another enterprise we tried, a different crop that we tried. It just didn't pan out. I think it would have, had the timing been right.

Warren: You mentioned your orchard; you said you got quite a few apple trees out there. How do you deal with the labor of picking all those apples and bringing them in?

Ackerman: The one advantage we've had so far in the apple operation is that with the dwarf trees that you don't need ladders. We can make ours a you-pick operation. So we don't pre-pick apples—at least we have not yet. Now, when all the youngest trees are in full production, we may be at that point and it will take more teenage labor. We've looked at ethnic labor to see if there's availability. So far, picking-wise hasn't been a problem; the problem has been the pruning and the spraying and all the other things that go with it. We planted our first orchard in '02; 2002, we planted the first third; 2004, we planted the next third; and in 2005, during that drought year, we planted that last third. I planted 70,000 gallons of water on top of the hill for the new plantings just to keep them alive that year.

Labor-wise, so far we've been able to cover our needs. When we get to the point where we have to pre-pick them because there would be too many for you-pick, we will be again in that labor crunch. And who's out there? There are people that say, "Oh, teenagers—they don't work anymore." That's not true. There are some good ones and some bad ones, and we weed them out pretty fast out here. You know right away if they're going to make it, and they know right away. But the good ones are great; they really are great. The ones that weren't going to make it, they weren't going to make it anyway out here.

Warren: Does your family maintain a garden just for things to help you out here?

Ackerman: Sure. Oh, yeah. We put up our own sweet corn. My wife, Yvette, raises peppers and tomatoes. She puts up an awful lot of salsa and tomatoes; she raises Roma tomatoes out here. We've never done any of that for sale yet. Now, my kids did sweet corn this year because we had an excess of sweet corn, and they got kind of taste for that; we got some spending money. They're looking forward to doing some again this coming year, so we'll see if that develops into anything. But the family garden here—we put up a lot of sweet corn, a lot of tomato products, some hot peppers. My wife has a real green thumb, so she's really good at that. She's kind of passing that along to my youngest daughter who has a real interest in it now, too.

Warren: We talked to your Uncle Ray this morning. I asked him about drainage, and he mentioned you had some ground that tends to be wet west of the farmhouse here. What are you doing with that property down there now?

Ackerman: Well, it's in a corn and beans rotation right now. There's kind of a high end of the farm, but mostly our farm is kind of gently rolling lowlands. All the Morton area was originally a swamp, essentially, so drainage tiles were really necessary to even farm this area. We live at the base of a huge glacial moraine. You can see right out the window there. It's the Washington Moraine. The benefits are that we have an aquifer that's maybe twelve foot underneath the ground that just never goes dry. Even in the droughts in the eighties, we were watering all those cattle off the same shallow well—a well that's only fourteen and a half foot deep. It never went dry. It came close, but it never did. Even when the creeks were dry, we had that aquifer. The downside is that you have to have tiles. We still have all clay drainage tiles. There are some as small as four inch; there are some as big as twelve inch in there. And it's a fair amount of upkeep for tiles that old. You get tile breakage commonly.

Warren: Is that something you have to tend to every year?

Ackerman: A lot of years. A wet year like this past spring was really hard on tiles. And as years go by, soil shifts, and there are some tiles that are too close to the top, now. There are other tiles that are buried way deeper than they originally put in—covered deeper, I should say. But yeah, there's some maintenance to that.

And the day will come where hopefully it will pay for itself to lay in plastic tile—some modern drainage tile—but that’s expensive; it will be a while, I think.

Warren: So for your various enterprises—corn, beans, pumpkins, strawberries—what kind of equipment...? There’s a tractor out here, I notice, hooked up to a trailer. What do you maintain on the farm here in terms of equipment?

Ackerman: It’s surprising the amount of things you need for each enterprise, the special needs for each enterprise; it’s kind of amazing to me. I didn’t anticipate that, getting into it. The apples, for instance. I need to spray my apples. Well, you can’t spray with a conventional sprayer, so originally I rigged up a vertical boom, and I could go up and down the apple trees. But it gets more complicated than that. You have to apply it under high pressure, and you want to apply it evenly over a vertical boom. I ended up buying a piece of equipment that was pre-made for that, but most of the time, I can’t really afford to just buy a piece of equipment. That sprayer was used. That stuff either isn’t available, or if you bought it new, it would be more expensive than you could afford. So what we end up doing is modifying the equipment we have. And it’s amazing to me—every operation needs its own equipment. The mums: when we were planting those in the ground, we needed to make furrows. Well, there really isn’t an exact piece of equipment that will lay down a flat-bottomed furrow in the spacing I needed. But I was at a farm sale, and I saw an old asparagus plow that I got for twenty dollars. (laughs) For that twenty dollars, I was able to modify this thing so that I could lay out furrows that I could put mum pots in and come back and cover. And that’s the only thing I will ever use that for, as far as I know. Now, I took some pieces off of that equipment to make myself a tree planter, because I modified one of the big spades—it’s kind of a symmetrical spade or plow share—and I was able to mount it behind a big tractor and bury this huge trench. We’d have people on the back planting trees. Then it had a piece that kind of covered over so they’d stay upright until we could really set them in. That piece of equipment will only be used for that.

So sometimes it’s a little frustrating because, instead of having that one nice, big, beautiful piece of equipment that’s shiny with new paint, well, it’s a rusty piece of equipment that’s kind of small, and there’s twenty pieces to it, and it’s got a lot of welds on it. But you have to have it. These enterprises need their own special thing.

Warren: Did you have any background in welding and morphing these things into equipment that you need and can use?

Ackerman: We always tease that the learning curve out here is really steep. (both laugh)

Warren: It’s on-the-job training.

Ackerman: On the job or on the fly. A lot of things I've learned, even fixing up the house. I didn't know anything about electrical wiring. A friend of mine really taught me the ropes. Now I'm really comfortable with electrical work. Same way with plumbing. I knew cattle well, I knew my equipment well, but I didn't grow up doing a lot of mechanical work. I'd never taken apart an engine when I was growing up like some of my friends had. Well, since then, by necessity, I've had to. (laughs) I've torn apart numerous pieces of equipment. And there's still things I'm deficient in, but willing to learn, and sometimes you just have to. You just can't pay somebody to do everything for you.

Warren: I'm curious about the pumpkins. Once they're ready to harvest, you handpick them, you said, and then you pick them up mechanically?

Ackerman: The processing pumpkins are picked up mechanically. They're rowed into rows first, and then they're picked up by a machine that throws them on a conveyor belt. The ornamental pumpkins—the ones that we raise out here—they're all hand-picked. They can't be scarred up, and they need to have long stems.

Warren: The pumpkins you ship off to Libby: how does that process work?

Ackerman: They provide the seed. You can plant them with a conventional planter, but you need to modify the spacings on it, which isn't too involved. They take a lot of cultivation. Any pumpkin plant—whether it's the processing ones or the ornamental ones—are a fickle plant. A vining plant is a touchy plant, susceptible to disease and fungus and insects. You may have to spray. If the plants have already pined?? out, you may have to pay for aerial spraying. When it comes harvest time, that's where the two differentiate. The processing pumpkins: they use a bar pushed in front of a tractor at an angle, so as it pushes through, it knocks the pumpkins off the vine, and it rows them into rows. Once that's done, a mechanical harvester comes in with a big paddle that flips the pumpkins onto a conveyor belt that goes up into either a waiting truck or a dump cart.

Now the ornamental ones, that's a whole different thing. Every one's cut by hand, the dirt's knocked off, set on a hayrack by hand, taken home and washed, that sort of thing.

Warren: Does Libby take all the pumpkins you can produce, or are there any surplus pumpkins in some years, or how does that work?

Ackerman: It's a little different than the other crops. The other crops, I sell on the open market, and there always is a market; the price is determined, you know, at the Board of Trade. The pumpkins are different. They will contract for a certain number of acres, and they'll tell you up front when you sign up what they will pay per ton. Now it's a question of what kind of yield can you get per acre. That would be where our management comes in. So a lot of years, I will have

raised maybe fifty acres of pumpkins for Libby's and a normal yield might be twenty to twenty-four ton an acre. Up until recently the price of pumpkins per ton was in that seventeen to eighteen dollar a ton range, but now the price of corn is through the roof. I sold corn at over four dollars the other day; I have never done that before. Warren: Four dollars...?

Ackerman: Per bushel. So Libby's, when they go around contracting their pumpkin ground, they're competing with corn and beans. A farmer is going to say, "Well, where can I make the most money?" So I understand Libby's this last year paid somewhere around twenty-five or twenty-six dollars a ton to be able to have a farmer to say, "Okay, I won't plant this corn that seems profitable; I'll go ahead and plant your pumpkins for you."

Warren: So you have to make decisions every year, based on the market that's out there.

Ackerman: You do, and as any conventional farmer does. It's frustrating because there's a new Farm Program coming out that should be out now (laughs) so we can make decisions right now. I'm actually making decisions that are two or three years out. I won't raise corn on ground that had pumpkins because the root room pressure is too high; so I need to think two years ahead just for that crop. When I did strawberries, I had to think three years ahead because I couldn't have certain chemicals residing in the soil past the time they'd be dissipated. But if you don't get that kind of lead time from decision-makers... Libby's will probably come out in February to sign contracts. That's not bad. In February, I could still decide if I want to switch a singular crop.

If the government can't decide on the Farm Program until April of this coming year—it's a seven-year program—I'm in a flux. What decisions can I make? One year when they made these kind of decisions, it determined your corn base: your base acres on which you receive payments. Well, if that's to happen again, I don't want it to be the year where I decide to plant all wheat, and then that's the year they determine, "Oh, this will be the year we're picking out your corn base. You've got zero for corn base." So I need this information upfront; it's tough to get upfront. I mean, I understand the process, but it's frustrating from my end, as it is for any conventional farmer.

Warren: Big gamble.

Ackerman: It is a gamble, and it's enough of a gamble with weather and markets to not have aberrations like a late Farm Program making it harder, I think.

Warren: This farm has changed a lot, based on what you've told us. Could you characterize it in a paragraph? Just give us kind of an overview of what all's happened here?

Ackerman: I think you can look at this farm as a quintessential family farm. This farm has been owned by people who love the lifestyle, love the land, want to pass that

on to their children, and have figured out a way to do that. So I guess our story is that I started farming in kind of one set of rules, one era, kind of transitioned to a new era. My wife and I and children have adapted to that to say, "What can we do keep this a family farm, to stay full-time farmers, to be able to be out here with our children and watch them grow up and enjoy that to pass it on to the next generation?" If my children want a farm in the future, then I feel like I have done the right thing. I have kept the farm alive. It didn't come just to me and end. If they don't want a farm, that's fine, too. That's their decision; that can be their choice at that time, but at least I haven't eliminated that possibility for them. If one of them wants to be the next Ackerman that farms, by golly, that's cool. That's a wonderful thing.

Warren: Can we talk a little bit about livestock again? You mentioned you got out of beef primarily in the late nineties, and the pig operation terminated as well. Were there ever dairy cows on the farm when you were here?

Ackerman: Not when I was here. Not when I was here, no.

Warren: And you've got goats, now. Have you ever had sheep?

Ackerman: I was very, very young when Dad had sheep here. I really don't even remember them being here.

Warren: And you've got a pony in the petting zoo, and what horse now?

Ackerman: We've got a miniature horse and a full-sized horse.

Warren: Do you do much riding?

Ackerman: I wish I could ride every day. When I was a kid growing up, another one of those advantages is that we could have a pony out here. When I outgrew the pony, I had a horse. Well now my kids, they can ride the horse. But time is an issue, too. When you start your own business, there's a lot of sixty, seventy, even eighty-hour weeks. So I wish I could ride that horse every day; I probably haven't ridden it in a month. My daughter, she probably rides once or twice a month, but she'd like to ride every day, too. The time constraints are tough on that.

Warren: And you mentioned the chickens. You have several different varieties of chickens, right?

Ackerman: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and it's been fascinating to me. Everybody assumes since I grew up on a farm I would know all there is to know about chickens. Well, I didn't know anything about chickens. (laughs) And I always thought honestly, "An egg's an egg. Well, fresh, probably no big deal." A fresh egg is so much better than a store bought egg. (laughs) It really is night and day. I didn't know that; we didn't have chickens when I grew up here. I know that there are some of these things that were on the farm. When my uncle grew up, there

were chickens. Well, I didn't experience that until just recently. So it's nice to kind of reach back and get a feel for that and know what it's like.

Warren: Now, are the chickens you raise primarily from the petting zoo, or do you get eggs for your own family use, or do you actually market the eggs?

Ackerman: When we started out, my daughter was doing it as a 4-H product, and she was making money selling eggs while our business was open to sell pumpkins. But she's gotten into some other things since then—a lot of gymnastics and extra school activities—so now we just get eggs for our own family use. But primarily, those chickens are there for people to see and enjoy.

Warren: So in terms of the animals that you maintain now, who does the work for feeding them, and the caring for them—checking for disease and things like that?

Ackerman: My two youngest children pretty much own all the livestock, so they do the chores when they're able, and when they're not, I pick up the slack for them.

Warren: Is there any special equipment you need to do those kinds of jobs?

Ackerman: There's a lot of housing. Between the pens and the housing, that's what's kind of involved. People say, "Oh, don't they have to be inside during the winter?" Well no, they have fur and coats, and they're fine weather-wise as long as they have fresh water every day, they're well-fed, they're out of the wind, and they're not wet. Well, but doing that means a lot of chopping of ice, a lot of heaters in their water tanks, making sure that they're housed well so that they're out of that wind and rain or snow. It's not any more involved than any other livestock operation, but I think people need to know that it's caring for them twice a day, every single day. It's a responsibility you have that you cannot miss.

Warren: So there's been change as well, not just in the crop operation, but also in the livestock on the farm. Can you kind of review that for us? Ackerman:

Well, when I grew up, it was corn and beans and cattle and hogs. The hogs were the first thing to go by the wayside. Then after a lot of years of struggling with the cattle, we got out of the cattle business. So that was almost the end of the livestock on this farm., and the facilities. The barn was torn down; the corn crib was torn down. A lot of the equipment was sold, too. It's just, now that we're back opening our farm to the public, that we have some of the more unusual livestock, and some of the smaller kinds of livestock. So it's not that a large part of the operation is wrapped around livestock like it used to be; it's just another component in those things that you like to have for people to come visit your farm.

Warren: Have the veterinary bills continued? Do you ever have problems with the animals?

Ackerman: We still have vet bills, but it's a lot less than the days where Dad and I used to trade off, checking the heifers that were pregnant every three hours, when it was cold in March. The days are also gone where we have cattle that are born in three inches of mud out in April. People also ask me, "Do you miss the cattle?" I say, "You know, on the days where the temperature's great, and the pasture's green, and it's dry out, I do. I miss those days. I thought I'd be a cattleman for the rest of my life. But the truth of the matter is I don't miss those days where it's twenty below zero and I'm chipping ice. I don't miss those days where there's six inches of mud and I'm pulling a newborn calf out of the ground. And I don't miss the days that it's so hot that I need to be providing water to the cattle that are just not taking the heat at all." The real truth of the matter is, I don't see me ever getting back in the cattle business. I think once you get out of it, like most farmers, you're very unlikely to get back into that business again.

Warren: You mentioned the people that help you here on the farm: hired hands and seasonal workers, students coming in. Could you kind of give us an overview of that overall? How many people, say, are on the farm at certain times of the year, helping out?

Ackerman: Well, when we started out, it was my wife and I and my two older children. And there used to be a couple guys from Peoria who used to go around to farms just picking up old iron. They were the junkmen, we used to call them, but they were also friends of ours. Well, they were looking for work; so for a couple years, a couple guys out of Peoria would come, and they'd pick Indian corn with me, we'd pick pumpkins together. They were pretty much part of our family. The older gentleman, he got to the point where he wasn't going to work anymore, but the younger fellow, still a good friend, still see him occasionally. This year, he did come back and work on weekends a little bit for us. But that's kind of the days where it was really just agriculture and we were still picking pumpkins, selling them roadside. It was early days in this. Now we have a gift shop, we have an apple orchard, we have the mums, we have pumpkins, corn maze. Now we have, I'm going to guess, six to eight part-time teenagers during season. We have maybe two college-age girls who are working our shop. We've got at least one full-time shop manager. At one time, during season, we had another four full-time adult ladies who were working various portions of our shops. So now it's pretty involved. It is. And I am really looking into some ethnic labor that might be available. I understand there are people looking for work.

As I get bigger each year, I run into more rules and regulations, and there are issues of housing, and can you go past a certain number of hours. You really need to work hand-in-hand with your government agencies, because you don't want to just, without thinking, not follow one of these rules, because you get in a lot of trouble for that. But that wasn't an issue just a few years ago. Now we're getting to the size where we have to be starting to look at those sort of things.

Warren: Looking at your gross receipts, expenses, and profits as the farm stands today, what are the most important elements to your productivity?

Ackerman: We have tried to do enterprise analysis out here. Because this is how I was trained in college: they say, "Gosh, you should look at this product and this product, and see where you make the most money, and you should raise enough of that until it finally diminishes—the excess returns diminish—until it equals this one, and on and on." And that's great on paper. In the real world, if you sell just pumpkins out here, but you don't sell mums and corn stalks and straw bales, your customer will go to the place that sells the corn stalks, if that's what they're looking for, and you will lose that customer. So what I'll end up doing is—I probably have a dozen enterprises here, easily. Maybe there's twenty. I don't know. But I have to have pumpkins, which I think are the primary income-producing part of our seasonal venture here. But if I don't have straw bales and corn stalks and mums and some Halloween decorations and apples... They all kind of work together, so it's really hard to separate. Because maybe we didn't make any money on straw. Maybe for straw itself, we look at our expenses and how much we grossed on straw—we do keep track at least on our change machine, where the money goes—to what department. So maybe straw didn't make us a dime, but straw is available for the people who want to set up a decoration that involves one straw bale, one corn stalk, a dozen pumpkins, some Indian corn.

So it's very hard to separate what makes you money and what doesn't. Because what we found is, if you don't have the whole package, you might not garner that customer. This kind of goes back to when we sold fresh-cut flowers; for one summer people wouldn't really stop because, well, that's just one thing. If they were setting up their table for whatever holiday or people are coming over, they might go to the local grocery store, because not only can they get their turkey and their side dishes, they can get their fresh-cut flowers there, too. So it's really hard. And it's such a difficult thing because every time you add an enterprise, it's a huge undertaking because there's a lot of research, there's a lot of fixed time to it.

So you have to make these decisions without having that perfectly lined-out guideline I want on paper. I want a computer to tell me, given these inputs, yes or no: should I raise rhinoceros? (interviewer laughs) Well, I want to know. Well, it's not that simple, and it's never going to be that simple. It's a frustrating part of this because there's got to be that area between where you don't have nearly enough information and where you have so much information that you think will give you that final answer that won't. There's got to be a place where you get the right amount of information, and then you use your management skills to make the right decisions.

Warren: Your crops and things you produce: are federal farm subsidies an issue for you?

Ackerman: They involve every part of the farm. And you still have to understand, even though we have the gift shop and the farm stand here, we're still very much full-time farmers with the corn and the beans and the program crops. So we make a lot of decisions based on: how is it affected by the program? You can't break any of the rules that come with the Farm Program, which are generally good rules. There are issues of subsidies, and we do get subsidies, but we have real strong feelings about, should there be these kinds of subsidies? And a lot of people think there should be, and there's a lot of us who thinks maybe there shouldn't be, or there should be much, much, much lower limits. So there is the politics of that.

But the Farm Program also does things that, in a way, favor us that I'm not sure even the exact right thing to do. For instance, we have a history of fruit and vegetable production. Therefore, we can still be in the Farm Program, still get government payments, but we can still raise those fruits and vegetables. If another farmer down the road who had no what they call FAV—fruit and vegetable history—if he decided, “Oh, I'm going to start a pumpkin farm,” he couldn't, because the fruit and vegetable people have lobbied that protection into the Farm Program. Is it right, is it wrong, is it good or bad? I benefit from it; I don't necessarily think it was the best legislation. It was good and bad. And so all this is done on the federal level, but it affects the family farmer like myself, and you make decisions based on these sorts of things. What are the rules, what are the benefits, what should you raise, what shouldn't you raise? And then it's not just do you make money on it, but how does the Farm Program affect your profit line?

Warren: Are there conservation issues on your farm? Are there things you're concerned about?

Ackerman: Absolutely. My dad was a real pioneer in this area of minimum tillage and conservation tillage. He had one of the first no-till planters in the area, I think in the early seventies. His planter was on display at the Heart of Illinois fair in Peoria, because it was an unusual item back then. When I was a kid, all the other farms, it was a sign of a good farmer to clean plow. When you got done plowing, there was no trash left on top—and by “trash,” I meant residue from the previous crop. None of that was left on top of the ground, just bare earth. That was the right thing to do in those days. Well, my dad was a man who said, “No, that isn't right. We're losing topsoil.” He was very much involved—minimum tillage, spring tillage. Now it's so much different than it was back then; very few people plow. I think it's a perfectly acceptable tool—occasionally in the right types of properties—if it's flat enough. But now the mindset has really changed. My dad was a real pioneer in that sort of thing. Conservation-wise, we've been involved in programs the government has available: the Conservation Reserve Program—the CRPs, the CREPs. I've done that with my uncle Ray. We've set aside ground. It's not just set aside for an economic reason; it's set aside purely for conservation reasons. Those are the areas that are like waterways or steep slopes that can be set aside.

We'll accept government payment to not farm on them, but there are some very strict rules on what you plant on them, how it was developed. You see the benefits from it. You see more wildlife now than we've seen in years.

Warren: Is there a wildlife habitat on the property?

Ackerman: On the farm, we talked about, there was I guess my great-grandfather's, who would have been C.W.'s—

: Yeah.

Ackerman: It was his dad—his farm—that I farmed for that family. There's about twenty-five acres set aside on a 160-acre farm, and there's wildlife there all the time. On Uncle Ray's forty, there's about two acres of conservation reserve. There's a huge government easement for water that runs through that area. Well, it's all grassed, it doesn't erode, and there's wildlife in there. So you've seen a real mindset change regarding a lot of conservation and ecology-minded programs. You see the benefit from that just by seeing the herons that fly by. You see more wildlife of all kinds.

Warren: What are some of those pleasurable things of farming for you?

Ackerman: Wow. There are amazing number of wonderful parts of farming. One, I think, is the freedom to decide: what is it that you are going to do today? You are responsible to yourself. Even if you make the wrong decision, you have had that freedom to say, "This is my priority today." And this priority might be, "I've got to fix that bearing on that combine," or it might be, "I'm taking the day off to have a picnic with my wife" because you have the opportunity. Now, a lot of times, you have to make the decision based on, gosh, I can't afford to do this or that. But you still are kind of in charge of your own destiny in that way. It's a lot of responsibility because it's not just for yourself; you've got to care for your whole family that way. So those decisions you make have to be disciplined by what's best for everybody. But it's a wonderful responsibility.

To work side-by-side with my children, that's phenomenal. Watch them grow, and not just see them at the end of the day or maybe a few minutes at breakfast, but I see them during the day, interact with them. Still healthy enough to play with them. That part's great. Being outside, being that close to God, where you feel you're part of his blessings, and you see the miracles. You plant that seed, and it grows into something. You touch it, you feel it, you smell it. That's fantastic. That's one of the best parts of farming.

Warren: What are some of the greatest challenges you have on the farm today?

Ackerman: Weather. Weather will always be a huge challenge. Being able to do those management practices that will at least buffer you from the variances in the weather—that's huge. The finances. As much as I love what I do, there have

been times where we were just barely making it. Because it takes one bad year, (laughs) and it'll cost you three or four good years to make up for one bad year. That's just the nature of cash flow and the finances of it. Sometimes when things get tough, it's a strain on the family and a strain on relationships with the family. If you're under a lot of stress, it wears on everybody. In those bad years, you have to be able to step back and say, "Look, this isn't long term. There's hope at the end of the run. God's not going to load you up with more things than you can handle. At this moment, it's hard, but I've got to step back and not make it hard on everybody else just because we're under stress." That'll make farming tough.

And there's a lot of people who walked away from it who say they're so much happier. The stress isn't there. When they leave their job at 5:00 in the afternoon, they might be able to not think about it 'til 8:00 the next morning, and there are people who love that. And I understand that. I can see how that would be great. When I leave Friday afternoon, I wouldn't have to think about it 'til Monday morning, but I'd have to give up way more than I gain, at least for me.

Warren: Could you tell us about your family? You're married?

Ackerman: I'm married, to my high school sweetheart. I married Yvette. We've been married now for—I better get this right—almost thirteen?? years. I have four children. My oldest is Carmen, in college. My next-oldest is Alex; he's a freshman in college. My youngest daughter is Katie; she's in junior high school. My youngest son, Sam, is in fourth grade.

Warren: Now your wife actually runs another shop in downtown Morton. Is that considered part of the farm operation, or is that independent?

Ackerman: Well, everything's so hard to separate out here. For tax purposes, (laughs) I imagine it's a separate entity. In the real life, that shop is kind of an extension of my wife's abilities and gifts. She has a real eye for color and styling and sense. So this gift shop and that gift shop are kind of an extension of her abilities. This gift shop started first. The reason we have a downtown store now is because the cash flow on a farm was very seasonal. We used to finish up Hallowe'en day, and now we go at least into the Christmas season, but that means there was all the other months of the year there was no cash from that part of the farm coming in. Well, you still carry all that inventory. The gift shop itself is really a larger undertaking than I ever thought it would be. With all that inventory and all the labor that goes with it—the displaying of it, the maintaining of it, the storing of inventory—shocked me. And if you use your retail space to store that same inventory, every square foot you've taken into storage you've taken out of retail sales area.

My wife has been just phenomenal about her ability to find those unusual items, those things that are different from what you'd find anywhere else.

People in town, I think, really respect what she's able to do. They'll come in and say, "Oh, I love what this is. This looks so pretty. Can you make me a gift basket? Can you recommend this to me?" She just has that knowledge and sense about her to be able to make this work and that work. Nothing I could do. (laughs) So downtown, sure, it's a separate entity, but it's still an extension of my wife's abilities.

Warren: So there are some gender roles on the farms: men's work that you help with and women's work that she helps with. How do you separate all that out?

Ackerman: There's no written rules, not by any means. And I don't think anyone would ever cross that line and say, "Oh, this is men's work," or "that's women's work." I just can never see that, because we all pitch in where we have to. But we're very cognizant about each others' abilities. I know we always tease, when I'm around the gift shop, my job is to lift heavy things. That's what I do. (laughter) And they won't let me touch the money. (laughs) But the truth of the matter is, we each have our abilities; we respect that. I would never tell her how to set up a display at the gift shop. I suppose I could do it, but there's no way I'd do it as well as she does. She doesn't tell me how to plant the pumpkins out here, not that she wouldn't have the ability to figure out how to get that done, but she knows that I have those skills and ability, and I can do it well.

So it's a good mix that way. Now, we're both strong personalities, so sometimes there's a clashing of personalities and ideas, but we work that out. That's normal, and it's a good thing; it strengthens our marriage, I think. But year, there are roles that we each do, but nothing's written in stone. It just has to do with what we acknowledge as our other strengths.

Warren: And the kids help out on the farm, too.

Ackerman: Mm-hmm. Now the older kids spent a lot of years; they made, I hope, good money. I wanted to teach them that their labor is worth something. I want them to go through the rest of their lives saying, "I have value, and if you're going to employ me, I deserve something for my effort." Now, that requires a good effort. So my older two worked for quite a few years, since the inception of the farm stand part of this. We even pulled our older two out of school one year before our big frost came in so we could harvest pumpkins in time. (laughs) Which the people in town just thought that made us Amish or something. (laughs) But as they got older we always said, "We never would try to force you stay on a farm." Well, my oldest daughter seems to have a lot of my wife's artistic ability. She now has a real good job at a clothing store, and still going to college. My oldest son has an interest in law enforcement, so I doubt if he'll stay on a farm. The two younger ones, they're really just now getting to be involved in the operation, seem to really love the farm. We'll see what happens as the years go by.

Warren: And you got neighbors, people you know at church as well,(inaudible speech) neighborhood of the farm.

Ackerman: I love the community that exists out here, not just in town, but the whole surrounding community. All the farmers know each other. We're always there to help each other if need be. The town of Morton is nearby. It's just the best of all worlds. The town is not so small that it can't have the modern conveniences. I mean, we have the fast food, we have the video stores, those sorts of things, all kind of businesses, but it's not so big you're anonymous. Everybody knows kind of what's going on, which is fun in its own way. I know if I have car trouble, I will have a ride within the next ten cars. (laughs) My car came off the off-ramp one time and died, and the next car that came off the off-ramp said, "Hey, John"—they knew me because they knew my car—"Do you need a ride?" (laughs) So I love that kind of closeness to community. My wife lived in Atlanta for fourteen years, and I think that's part of the reason she moved back up here before we were married, is that she didn't like the anonymity of being in a huge city.

Here, you know people, you're pulling for people, you're helping people. When my dad had a stroke in the mid-eighties, there were eleven combines out here, and they harvested everything in one day. It's just great to be part of that community. When a neighbor of mine's father had a stroke, my truck was in line to haul grain that year. So it's that give and take where we're all there for each other, and we understand the struggle, we understand the needs, we understand the sacrifices. It's fantastic to be part of that.

Warren: Now, you said at one point that occasionally you might take a day off. What do you do on your day off?

Ackerman: (laughs) Well, just—

Warren: Trapping or hunting?

Ackerman: No. Actually, I have done a little bit of hunting this year. But it's really hard to take a full day off. I know that sounds bad, because we really don't take vacations. And I would love to be in a financial place to be able to take my children on vacations, but that doesn't really happen now. That's not the kind of financial position we're in. But you can do things like take a half-day off, or maybe an hour here. So I went hunting with a buddy from church for a few hours in August; we were hunting doves. On Sundays, I took the kids sledding; we spent all afternoon sledding. There are moments in time you can take. There isn't any one special thing. I still treat myself to volleyball one evening a week. I'm now playing the children of the people I used to play against years ago. (laughter) But I do enjoy that, you know, so I'm glad I have the opportunity to do that.

Warren: Just to kind of sum up, how do you feel about changes in farming and farm life that are going on around you?

Ackerman: Honestly, there's a sense of sadness, to me, about this. The rate of the loss of farms and farmers is staggering, and it makes me sad. I understand the economics of it. I know it's the way it's going to be. I don't think it's going to change. There are things about the Farm Program I think could be changed to slow this rapid decline of farms down. So that part makes me sad. I look at it like I see the barns; I see barns all over, and they're disappearing so fast. Each one of those to me is a symbol of a family farm that's gone, too. Just this last week, there were two barns that were on either edge of Morton—gone. They tore them each down in a day. And I keep thinking, "That barn represented that family that had all these experiences that we talked about, and that's gone. Now, the families, they exist, they live somewhere else, but they don't have that benefits of being that farm family. They don't have the same experience." That makes me sad. Is that the way of the world? I guess that is. Is that the economies of scale? Sure. Does it make me sad? Yeah. And are we fighting it here? Sure we are.

Development keeps getting closer and closer. I tease people that we'll sell out the day they pry the deed out of my cold, dead fingers. (both laugh) But there's a pretty good chance I'll lose one of the farms I farm. I don't hold any ill will. They're cousins of mine, but they're out of state; they don't farm. At some point, they should make an economic decision: what's best for our family and our children? And if the day comes where they sell out, God bless them; that's the right decision for them. But for here, we're holding out to this little island of this is the way agriculture has been good to us, this is what we want to pass on, this is what we want to hold onto.

Warren: So are you going to try to maintain the family farm here as long as you can?

Ackerman: That would be my goal. Now, twenty years from now, if something happens where that isn't a viable goal, I wouldn't cling to that goal beyond the needs of my family. But I hope that it's the best thing for our family.

Warren: So looking to the future, what kinds of changes do you see in agriculture and farming, especially in this part of Illinois, the next ten to twenty years?

Ackerman: It's going to be incredible. I've heard people say that the rate of change is changing. There's an exponential change in the way things are. What types of things are you going to see, specifically? You'll see 400-bushel-an-acre corn. You'll see robotic planters. You'll see crops you've never seen before; they'll be genetically modified. Fifteen years ago, it would take several months to get a DNA sample analyzed; now it's almost instantaneous. What's it going to be fifteen years from now? We'll be able to modify the very basis—nucleus—to make whatever designer plant you want. What happens if you can make a corn plant that'll make 600-bushel-an-acre corn? Now what happens to the family

farm? Because farms will disappear right and left. Is that bad? Well, in the greater scheme of things, it's cheap food for the country. There'll be land cleared up for conservation; there'll be parks and recreation. In the great, great scheme of things, is it a good thing? Is progress always a good thing? (sighs) I guess. I guess, when you look at the overall picture. So does it affect families, family farms, along the way? You bet it does. You know, they used to tease back in the fifties; they'd say, "You know, the world of 1985 will have antigravity cars." (interviewer laughs) Well, of course that didn't come true. But again, that rate of change is changing. Could we say now without teasing, "Well, the world of 2035 will have antigravity cars"? Is that outlandish to say? Is that a joke now? I don't think so. What's going to happen to agriculture? Will you be able to sit at a computer, push buttons, and your property be farmed? Will you never have to actually touch that seed? Will you never have to touch that grain that's been harvested? Is the day gone where you're going to have to be that guy who fixes that bearing in the combine? Is the day gone where there's even a combine? Twenty years from now, who's going to come up with that invention that makes the combine the old steam-powered thresher? What's going to replace it? I don't know, but I think it would be foolish to say there are limits on the changes that'll happen.

Warren: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that we haven't brought up?

Ackerman: I could keep you here 'til midnight. (laughter) We can get that. (laughter)

Warren: Wait, one other thing I think you should talk about is your sister, because she, too, has a life related to agriculture. That all kind of grew up here as well. So maybe just a little bit about that?

Ackerman: Yeah. Well, my sister Debbie grew up here with me doing the same types of things I did. I always got the impression she was mildly frustrated by that old rule of men did certain things and women did certain things because I don't think that was her outlook. She is one of the brightest people I know. She never got a B, not once, in all of her schooling, and these are back in the days when even as a first-grader, you got letter grades. First grade through senior year of college, she got straight A's. That's impressive. Grew up along with me; we both had ponies, both had horses, both enjoyed this lifestyle. I think she always knew and appreciated the farming lifestyle, and I think she always wanted to be close to that. She found a nice young man that she married, and now she lives on a farm north of here a ways, and she deals with all the problems and joys of farming. They farm much larger acreage.

But she's much more isolated than I am. I think through her experiences, I've learned to realize that even though town's growing so close it feels a little creepy to me—a little bit too close, maybe—I know that it takes me two minutes to go to the grocery store or to do whatever convenience. I want my car fixed, I'm in town in two minutes—anywhere in town. My sister lives

quite a ways from any decent-sized town, so if she wants a convenience—she wants to go to the auto mechanic or the video rental store, or whatever it is she's got to drive quite a ways. And that's kind of an isolation that I don't think you realize. I guess I didn't appreciate until I saw it in her. So I look at her experience, said, "Okay, I appreciate more of the blessings I have here."

And she's got a fascinating life there—really active, really involved. Her two young boys are growing fast, and they're just bright kids and good athletes. They have a lot of advantages to their style of operation, too. But they're kind of that large farm, large operation, large acreage, big equipment—really impressive machinery. It's fascinating to see how they farm and how we farm and the differences.

Warren: Would it be possible for her to even diversify like you have? I mean, farther from a town?

Ackerman: It would be harder. It would definitely be much harder. It's that location, location thing. We're really blessed to be close to town, on a major road. She's a long way from a town on a very small road. Could she do this? She has the ability to do this, they have the acreage to do this, so they have the resources. It'd be a lot harder for her to do this sort of thing. Then you go back to all these other little constraints. They're in the Farm Program—would they even be allowed to raise pumpkins and fruits and vegetables for sale? I think it would be difficult if not impossible for her to do on her farm what we do on this farm.

Warren: Are you unique here? Are there other farms comparable?

Ackerman: There are other farms in our situation, scattered all over the state. I go to meetings where we all get together and we talk, and there are all kinds of differences. What's fascinating is the way people take advantage of their own very particular setup. There are blueberry farms that work on acid-based soils. They probably couldn't raise terrific pumpkins, but they can raise wonderful blueberries, and so that's what they do. They take advantage of the resources they have. There's a lot of farms scattered throughout the state that are like us. I think as the years go by you'll see either a vast disappearance of farms or a great deal of little specialty farms cropping up. I kind of hope that happens, because at least those farm families can find that niche and stay farming.

Warren: Anything else?

Ackerman: Could keep you here 'til midnight. (laughter)

Warren: Debbie also has some of the qualifications of your dad: Bronze Tablet, livestock judging team at Illinois, and she has excellent horsemanship. She used to jump and—

Ackerman: Oh yeah, I didn't even think about that. Yeah, my sister was Bronze Tablet, U of I also. I was close, but I had a lot of fun in college, and (laughter) I didn't prioritize my grades as well as I should have. (laughs) You don't regret that until you have your own kids, and they say, "Gee, Dad, why weren't you Bronze Tablet?" Oh, no reason really. (laughter)

Warren: Mean professors, right?

Ackerman: Yes, mean. (laughter) Eighty-three was a tough year any way you look at it—weather, drought, cold, and professors. (laughter) I don't know how far in your interview process you want to go off in the families, but she would be a fascinating person to talk to because she has a whole different outlook: a farm girl growing up in the seventies on the farm. And I look at things with my own little tunnel vision, so I grew up as a man on a farm, and I have my own perspective. She grew up in those transition decades where the women's movement was coming along, and I think she was disgusted by people who would say, "Oh, you just sit there and look pretty, and we'll do the hard work." She'd be like, "Who are you kidding?" because she could throw bales as well as the rest of us if she wanted to.

And I think she ran into that. She was a feed salesman for Nutrena Feeds for a while, and I think she was a little bit put out by—not everyone, but a few—people who would say, "Oh, a woman shouldn't be selling feed." She ran into, I think, just a couple customers like that, but I think she was shocked by that, and I'm kind of shocked by that because it seems like such a foreign mindset. But you know, if you were a lot, lot older, and maybe you grew up that way, maybe that's what you stick with, but it doesn't seem very progressive to me.

Warren: She also took ag economics, too.

Ackerman: Yeah, yeah, she was ag ec, same as I was. We both did judging teams in college, and... So yeah, her experiences were very similar to mine.

Warren: Well, this has been great.

Ackerman: The only other thing I can even think of to be worthy of keeping you any longer for (laughs) is the thing that we run into that also surprised me a little bit is, when you open up your farm to the public, one of the real joys of this to me is being able to talk to people and hear their stories. Everybody's got a story; people are just fascinating. And I get a little sad because the bigger we get, the less time I have to just sit down and chat with people. But I still have a time to do that. I get my field trips; I have time to talk to people one-on-one, and I love that.

What's really shocking is once in rare while where you run into that bad customer. And I keep telling my kids—because my kids will be shocked and appalled, and they'll just be morally in a rage—and I say, "Now, look. Sit back a second and realize that was one customer out of 2,000 customers this

last month, and one was bad, so that one sticks in your mind. But what you've got to remember is the others. Because we attract a really terrific crowd. The people that come out here, it's just a wonderful demographic of families and grandparents, and just people wanting to have that country experience and take it a little bit slower and enjoy the animals. So animal lovers and country lovers. So we are so blessed with the customer base we have. So on that rare time that we get an unusual customer, I have this little cache of stories that I keep back. It's so funny because it's six or eight stories of these really horrid customers, (laughs) but it's only six or eight. You got to kind of take it as just fun because it's such a small percentage of the people we get.

When you open up your farm to the public, you have to be that type of person that it's okay to have people wander around your farm, it's okay to have people park wherever they're going to park, and not everyone's going to discipline their children the way you think they should and that sort of thing, or they won't even have the knowledge to not stick their finger in the animal cage, and you know what I mean, that sort of thing. So to do this takes a certain personality, and you have to be willing to do that. So I thought that might be worthwhile to know.

Warren: Good advice.

Ackerman: That's everything.

Warren: Super, John, thank you very much.

Ackerman: It's no problem.

Warren: It's been a real pleasure.

Ackerman: It has.

(end of interview)