

Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with John R. Block

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
and Illinois State Museum's

Oral History of Illinois Agriculture project

Interview # AIS-V-L-2009-022

John R. Block, former Secretary of Agriculture for the Reagan administration and life-long farmer from Knox County, Illinois, was interviewed on the dates listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's and Illinois State Museum's *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture* project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: July 9, 2009 Location: Arlington Independent Media studios, Arlington, VA

Date: July 10, 2009 Location: Arlington Independent Media studios, Arlington, VA

Date: July 10, 2009 Location: Arlington Independent Media studios, Arlington, VA

Interview Format: Digital video

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue, Director of Oral History, ALPL

Technical Support (cameraman, etc): Devin Gallagher, Arlington Independent Media

Transcription by: Kay Smith, ALPL Volunteer

Edited by: Cheryl Wycoff and Rozanne Flatt, ALPL Volunteers

Video Indexed by: Mike Maniscalco, IL State Museum

Total Pages: 75 pgs. Total Time: 2:01 + 1:40 + 0:35min = 4hr 16min = 4.26 hrs.

Session 1: Early life, career as farmer, Director of Ag for IL, and Sec. of Agriculture

Session 2: Secretary of Agriculture with Reagan administration & follow-up career

Session 3: Reflections on the state of agriculture in 2009

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on 08/04/2009.

The interviews are archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in
Springfield, Illinois.

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Abstract

John R. Block, *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture*, AIS-V-L-2009-022

Biographical Information/Overview of Interview: John R. Block was born on February 15th, 1935 in Galesburg, Illinois, and grew up on the family farm in Knox County. He attended the local one room school and tiny Knoxville High School, then the United States Military Academy, receiving his commission as a Second Lieutenant in 1957. After further military training and service with the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Block resigned his commission in 1960 and returned to the family farm in Knox County. For sixteen years he worked with his father and gradually built the farm from a few hundred acres to approximately 3,000 acres, finishing 6,000 hogs annually by 1977. He became involved in the Illinois Farm Bureau and the Hog Producers Association, eventually becoming Farm Bureau President for Knox County. In 1977, newly elected governor Jim Thompson selected Mr. Block to be Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture where he served for the next four years, travelling extensively, including trips to China and the Soviet Union.

In December of 1980 Block agreed to be President Reagan's Secretary of Agriculture. He handed the operation of the farm to his son, Hans. The early Reagan administration included a severe recession, high rural unemployment and very high interest rates: difficulties for agribusiness and farming. One of Secretary Block's first accomplishments was to convince Reagan to lift the grain embargo on the Soviet Union established by Jimmy Carter in 1980. Block also cut down government-warehoused commodity surpluses with the adoption of the PIK (Payment-in-Kind) program. He worked toward a major revision of U.S. farm policy, and in 1985 helped to pass the landmark Food Security Act, which emphasized increasing exports while lowering future farm supports. In 1986 he resigned as Secretary of Agriculture and began assisting farmers and businesses working with Congress. Block remained active in the family farm, now run by his son, and watched it grow to over 5,000 acres, finishing 10,000 hogs per year. He addresses a variety of contemporary issues in agriculture.

Subject Headings/Key Words: Knox County, Illinois; United States Military Academy; Illinois Farm Bureau; Governor Jim Thompson; Illinois Department of Agriculture; Ronald Reagan; 1980 Soviet grain embargo; PIK (Payment-in-Kind) program; Food Stamp program; School Lunch program; 1985 Food Security Act (1985 Farm Bill); Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz; Secretary of Agriculture Robert Bergland; George H.W. Bush; Federal Chairman Paul Volcker; French President Francois Mitterrand

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