

Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with Chris Eckert

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

Oral History of Illinois Agriculture project

Interview # AIS-V-L-2008-040

Chris Eckert, President of Eckert's Incorporated, an orchard and Pick-Your-Own operation, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's and IL State Museum's *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture* project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: July 31, 2008 Location: Eckert's Orchards in Belleville, IL

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Interview Format: Digital video

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

Technical Support (cameraman, etc): Mark Suszko and Greg Lipe, IL Information Service

Transcription by: Tape Transcription Center, Boston, MA

Edited by: Ann Countryman, ALPL Volunteer and Rozanne Flatt, ALPL Volunteer

Total Pages: 53 Total Time: 1 hr 6 min + 30 min + 1 hr 19 min / 1.1 + .5 + 1.32 = 2 hr 55 min / 2.92 hrs

Session 1: Eckert family history and evolution of the Eckert family farm

Session 2: Maturation of the current Eckert Orchards and farm

Session 3: Walking tour of the Eckert orchards, packing plant and farm

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on 11/25/2008.

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

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Abstract

Chris Eckert, *Oral History of IL Agriculture*, AIS-V-L-2008-040

Biographical Information Overview of Interview: Chris Eckert was born on May 18, 1972 in Belleville, Illinois, and grew up in nearby Millstadt. His grandfather Kurt, father Lary and uncle Jim operated Eckert's Orchards and later Eckert's, Inc. in Belleville, Grafton and Millstadt, Illinois: apple and peach orchards and a roadside stand that, over time, evolved into a grocery store, restaurant and pick-your-own operation, catering to families in the metro-St. Louis area. Chris grew up knowing that the family business would be his future as well. He discussed family celebrations and the evolution of the family business through seven generations. Chris studied agriculture economics at the University of Illinois, graduating in 1994, then spent two years away from the business (a family tradition) before returning. He married Angie Boeker in 1995. His father and uncles recently turned over the role of President to Chris.

The business today includes a country store, garden center, a peach wholesale business, restaurant, bakery, deli and wine cellar along with the pick-your-own operation. Chris considers his business to be as much about entertainment, catering to families as it is agriculture. It employs 100 people full-time, and in the peak peach harvesting and pick-your-own season in the late summer and fall, has as many as 400 employees. One hundred of these are migrant workers from Mexico, in America on H-2A agricultural visas, a temporary visa for non-residents. Chris discussed all aspects of the family business, including the peach packing operation, care of both the peach and apple orchards, and the diversity of fruit and vegetable plantings. He also discussed the role of government programs in the farm, the importance of crop insurance, and current immigration policies as they relate to his migrant labor force.

Topics Covered: Multi-generational family life on an Illinois farm; evolution of a farm in Illinois; maintaining peach orchards; peach packing; maintaining apple orchards; pick-your-own farms; Eckert's Orchards; Eckert's Incorporated; University of Illinois; Department of Agriculture programs; crop insurance; immigration policies; H-2A agriculture visa

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

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