

Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with John H. Ackerman

Part of the Illinois State Museum's and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Oral History of Agriculture in Illinois*
Interview # AIS-V-L-2008-048

John Ackerman, a farmer and operator of various farm product shops, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's and Illinois State Museum's *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: January 29, 2007

Location: Morton, Tazewell County, Illinois

Interview Format: Digital audio / Digital video

Interviewer: Robert Warren

Technical Support: camera, Doug Carr

Transcription by: Tape Transcription Center, Boston, MA

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Abstract

John H. Ackerman, *Oral History of Illinois Agriculture*

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Biographical Information / Overview of Interview: John Ackerman was born on January 6, 1961 in Peoria, Illinois. He grew up on the small farm where his father (Clyde) and uncle (Ray) had been born. The farm was typical of many in the area at that time, raising hogs, beef cattle, corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. John was active in 4-H and FFA, and later studied Agricultural Economics, Meat Science, and Animal Husbandry at the University of Illinois. After graduating in 1983, John returned to the farm to work with his father. It was a tough year to start farming, with a summer drought and record cold temperatures in December. John faced more difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s, and he decided that the farm operation would have to change if it was to survive. He grew pumpkins for the nearby Libby's canning factory, and then began raising many different varieties of ornamental pumpkins and gourds. Based on customer suggestions, John and his wife, Yvette, also started marketing chrysanthemums, apples, and seasonal decorative items. They opened the farm to agritourism, transformed an old farm building into a seasonal gift shop, and added a petting zoo and corn maze. Yvette also created a second shop in downtown Morton, which operates year-round. Ackerman Farms could serve as a model of how small family farms can survive by diversifying and developing niche markets.

Keywords: Ackerman Farms; family farm; small farm; Yorkshire hogs; Hereford beef cattle; horses; chickens; goats; ducks; peacocks; turkeys; pheasants; corn; soybeans; alfalfa; fresh-cut flowers; sweet corn; Dickinson pumpkins; ornamental pumpkins and gourds; chrysanthemums; apples; strawberries; hot peppers; Roma tomatoes; blueberries; orchard; garden; chores; Methodist Church; University of Illinois; drought; severe cold; niche farming; Libby's pumpkin canning factory; gift shop; farm labor; agritourism; petting zoo; corn maze; school tours; hayrack ride; drainage; special equipment; enterprise analysis; conservation; no-till agriculture; gender roles; economy of scale; farm failures; barn demolition; Web site (www.ackermanfarms.com).

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