

Interview with Yvette Ackerman

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Interviewer: Robert Warren

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Warren: We are here with Yvette Ackerman. You go by Eve?

Ackerman: Most of the time.

Warren: Then I'll call you Eve. Could you give us your full name, and age and date of birth, please?

Ackerman: Yvette Michelle Boone Ackerman. I'm forty-five, and I was born May 30, 1962.

Warren: Great. And I forgot to mention that it's December 19, 2007. We're at Ackerman Farms, near Morton, in Tazewell County, Illinois. And can you tell us about your birthplace and your immediate family—mother, father, and your siblings if you have any siblings?

Ackerman: Sure. I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. My mother and father are Donald and Marie Boone—yes, Donny and Marie. (laughs) And they're both still alive, both still married to each other. I have a brother, Lee, he's Donald Lee Boone, Junior, and he's a year younger than I am. And he lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

Warren: Where did you grow up?

Ackerman: Kind of all over. My dad was into computers and was a master programmer in the very beginning, in the sixties and all, and so we moved a lot. So we spent a few years in Alabama, and then we lived close to an Army base in Texas while he worked with some programming for the government. We went to Chicago for several years, and then we moved downstate to Morton, where I met my husband in high school. And then we went to Georgia, where I lived for about fourteen years. I moved back up here in, I think, '94—1994.

Warren: How long did you live in Morton the first time you were here?

- Ackerman: Only about three and a half years, and then we transferred down to Atlanta, Georgia.
- Warren: So that's where you met John, and then you moved back here and got married right?
- Ackerman: Right. I had been married once before, in Atlanta, and was divorced. I decided that I wanted to raise my kids back in the Midwest. I found Atlanta—no offense to Atlanta—but I found it a little anonymous, if you will. It's hard to get to know your neighbors, and going to the grocery store requires a good hour of your time, mostly in traffi; I just didn't want that anymore, so decided to come back here.
- Warren: Now Ackerman Farms is just about a mile east of Morton, is that right?
- Ackerman: Mm-hmm.
- Warren: So you're real close to town. Can you kind of describe the town of Morton for us?
- Ackerman: Well, I find Midwesterners to be friendly, but in a cautious sort of way. But I knew that once you were a friend, it was a friendship for life, and I wanted my kids to have that. When I moved back to this area there were several places I was looking at, but the Morton School District had the best reputation. Both of my kids are bright—of course—and I wanted them to be in the school district and get the benefit of that education, because I had gone through high school in Morton, and I knew really what it was going to be all about. My goal was for my kids to not grow up moving all over the place, and so I wanted them to settle someplace where they would be known and where they would know other people.
- Warren: So when you moved back to Illinois, you and John got married and moved into the house. When did that happen?
- Ackerman: We got married about nine months, I guess, after I moved back, and we actually (laughs) lived in a third-floor apartment with soon-to-be three kids. Circumstances changed here on the farm, with John's mom having a stroke and having to be hospitalized, and then going into a nursing home facility. His dad had never really, you know, lately, been on his own and cooked for himself or did his own laundry or really anything like that. We knew it was time, and we talked it over with him. He was agreeable—I think mostly because he was hungry. (laughter) And then we moved in. It was not easy for anybody, and certainly not for Papa, because it had just been him and Margaret for several years. They had their own way of doing things, and here come this loud bunch of people that move in with him and start beating up his house and tearing things down and cooking meals that he didn't normally eat. It was an adjustment for—well, for him and for everybody.

Warren: So did he live with you guys here in the house for a time?

Ackerman: We did for several years. Yeah, we did—a few years.

Warren: We talked to John about the evolution of the farm, starting out as a corn and beef cattle operation, and it's just bloomed into something totally different at this point. (Ackerman laughs) Could you kind of summarize the evolution of the farm from your perspective? Some of the things that have been developed, like the shop, from your own experience.

Ackerman: It's been a real switch, because when we moved here, I was still working outside of the house more in a human relations kind of office, suit setting. And it was really different. Moving out here, I'd never been on a cattle farm before, so getting up at 3:00 in the morning because fence was broken and cattle were getting on the highway, and you're three months pregnant and holding a flashlight. (laughter) That was a real switch for me. (laughs) That changed a lot. I mean, a lot of things were just different. But you adapt, and then of course, things just change. We had to consider how we were going to be able to stay on the farm.

And things also changed when we had our fourth child, because he was a high-risk pregnancy, bed rest. Then when he was born he had health issues, and that kind of decided the fact that I would be home, at least for those first few years. By that time we had four children, so I was needed here. But it's hard to go away from a salary and benefits to self-insured and no paycheck—(laughs) steady paycheck—coming in. So we had to come up with something else to do.

Warren: So what was one of first things you guys tried?

Ackerman: Well, I think John probably told you the story about how we sort of just fell into growing pumpkins. It just kind of morphed from me taking our youngest son, Sam, out on hayracks with me to load pumpkins by hand and having just an honor-system bucket sitting out there if people wanted to buy their pumpkins, to what it is now. We kind of listened to what our customers wanted. When they showed up the first year and they liked the different varieties of pumpkins, well, some of them would ask for something even different. And then they started asking for chrysanthemums, and then they said how neat it would be if we had apples. We kept chasing people out of the old hog building, and finally it occurred to us that maybe (laughs) we should give them something to go in and see instead of shooing them out all the time. So we raised the building up. And I have kind of a background—a little bit—in retail and an interest in home décor, and it just kind of morphed from there.

Warren: John's already told us how many wheelbarrows of manure (laughter) had to be hauled out.

Ackerman: It was an aromatic summer. (laughs)

Warren: Let's skip that part this time. (laughter) But the building was raised, and it's on blocks now, and it's got a heated floor. Is it open year-round, or is there a particular season for it?

Ackerman: No, it's still a basic barn building. While we have added things over the years, we knew ahead of time it was going to be cold, because sometimes our first frost is early October, late September. So John went ahead and put the radiant floor heat in. Well, the first year we were open we decided to carry some Christmas items, but we also froze. So the next year we blew insulation into the sides, and we blew insulation against the tin roof so that all our heat wouldn't just wick through the roof. And you know, just kind of went from there. But no matter what you do, that building is not going to be warm in January. Nobody's going to want to come out in January.

Warren: I noticed a little bit of sunlight in a few spots. (laughter) Now can you kind of summarize the variety of the things that you have in the shop out there?

Ackerman: Well, our tag line is 'It's an eclectic assortment of gifts and home décor.' We don't want our customers to find the same old, same old they're going to find somewhere else. We like to carry Illinois products if we can; if not, Midwestern products. We like to feature different cooks and artists in our region that are really very good. I'm very picky with that because my background—when I lived in Georgia—was all food, you know, catering, and restaurant management, and customer service, and all of that. I worked with some great cooks and some great chefs over the years, so I was pretty picky about the foods that we carried. And I ran into some great people. They're passionate about what they do, and that's always encouraging, to have somebody who's that excited about their products, because that translates to us, and we can be excited about their products, too. So we have quite a following and a lot of things now.

Warren: And the shop here came before the shop in town?

Ackerman: Right.

Warren: Can you tell us about the development of the shop in town?

Ackerman: Well, (laughs) it's kind of like all farmers: come August, you're dirt poor. Cash has run out. We wanted to find something that would give us a little bit—not a lot, but at least a little bit of cash flow coming in throughout the year. It just kind of fell into our laps. There had been this building that I had admired for a few years and thought it was really a cute place, and all of a sudden, it became available. Like every other decision we've made, it's been by the seat of our pants. (laughs) We just did it. And it was fine. It was a good idea. It was a small boutique; it was a nice fit—for about a year—and then we started having growing pains. Customers would like us to carry this line. And certain lines just kind of develop. Each location definitely has its own

personality, and lots of times it has its own clientele. You kind of have to follow what your customers are telling you.

When we had an offer to move to our second downtown location this past July, I was actually the one dragging her feet because I liked my little boutique, but I knew we needed more space. I thought the timing was all wrong because it was July, and we're going to open at the shop here in August. But it's really worked out well. It's two and a half times bigger than the shop we had before—the little boutique—and it's roughly the same size as what we have here, and the clientele's completely different.

Warren: The merchandise you have in the two different shops: is there any overlap at all, or is it totally different?

Ackerman: There's a little bit of overlap. And that was another reason we opened downtown; we do carry specialty foods and specialty crafts and items that you can't find anywhere else. Our customers—we had been open here for four years—and they're like, "But you close in December, and I have to wait until August to get what I need." So we decided to give them an opportunity to get the items that they wanted; we didn't think we'd need that much space to do that. That changed.

Warren: Now, do you have to do traveling to buy the stock for the store downtown?

Ackerman: Mm-hmm. I've done Atlanta, and I've done the Chicago shows. Atlanta is convenient because I have friends and family down there, but it's also a really big show and overwhelming. Chicago: I think I can do in my sleep now. (laughs) But they come in January, which is traditionally a downtime for retail. So everybody says, "Oh, you get to rest in January," and it's like, "No, no." That's when taxes are due; that's when you go to your gift shows; that's when you have to do a lot of buying and things like that. And then we also do auctions and estate sales because we mix our products. They know that if they want to buy a piece of furniture—which we didn't anticipate in the beginning—we'd have one-of-a-kind pieces that we picked up just for display. Well, people wanted to buy them. So that's kind of morphed into its own thing. But our customers know that often what they see is it. I mean, it's one-of-a-kind, and if they want it, they better get it then because it'll be gone. So we do a lot of estate sales, a lot of auctions. John's always pulling over to the side of the road so I can go look at something that I've just seen—(laughs) happens all the time.

Warren: Could you kind of summarize some things that you provided for your store downtown?

Ackerman: Well, it's a diverse mix of furniture, that's for sure. It kind of morphed into a baby—almost like baby boutique—kind of items. I just took on a new vendor. She is a bow-maker; she makes hairbows for little girls, all because she didn't

like what was out there when she had her daughter. She decided to start making them herself, and it just kind of grew from that. And we carry jewelry, which didn't really go over so well here, but when we took it downtown, we couldn't keep it stocked enough. Some of it is local glassblowers and different artists that we find at maybe some of the juried art shows. If I really like their products, I try to get to know them and see if they're willing to wholesale to me. I don't like to do consignment on anything at all. There's only one person I'm willing to do that with, and he's a local photographer here in the area who does beautiful landscapes and florals. It's a real diverse mix. You may not find the same thing when you walk in a month later.

Warren: So you're responsible for both the shop here at the farm and the one downtown. How many employees do you have at any given time?

Ackerman: Well, at the peak of our season we have about nineteen. And then in our downtime—our slower season, which is roughly January to August—we run anywhere from three to five. Some of them are our own kids. You know, as they get older, they come on as payroll versus slaves. (laughter)

Warren: I assume they appreciate that.

Ackerman: They seem to. (laughter)

Warren: Now, what kind of people work in your shops? Are they high school students, college students...?

Ackerman: Our seasonal workers tend to be during the day—our moms—because they want to work while their kids are in school and then be available to them before school and after school, which works out fairly well. Then after school, it tends to be high schoolers. I was explaining before, some of our kids are now second-generation kids, because this is, I think, our ninth year now. So we've gone through the brothers and sisters, and we're moving on to the next group of kids. It's funny, because some of them stay with us throughout high school. I've got one working for me downtown who was in high school, and now she's in college, and she's still with me. They have a habit of getting a real job and going away, (laughs) but for the meantime, it's a pretty good mix. The only problem is if all of our kids go to the same high school, then they all want the same prom off or the same homecoming dance, or they may all have the same vacation time and may all need to be gone. And the same with our moms: if they're all from the same school district, same thing. If their kids have a day off, then they all want to be off with their kids. That can be a little bit tricky.

Warren: So you have to be on top of it all the time with the staff.

Ackerman: I hate doing the schedule. (laughter) It's a juggling act sometimes. But I have really good people who have been with us for years, and that's helpful. That's real helpful.

Warren: We talked to John a little bit about gender roles on the farm. Do you consider yourself a farm wife or a farm person, or do you consider yourself more of a retail person based on the farm?

Ackerman: Wow. Well, I don't get out there and pick pumpkins like I used to. (laughter) That slipped disk, it's coming in handy now. It depends. It just depends. Right now, I feel like I've been pulled away from the home farm probably more than I would like to, because that was my goal, to be here. But it's kind of morphed into other things. I'm not sure that I would ever be satisfied to just work here, if that makes sense. Not putting homemakers down at all, but I think if I didn't have some kind of creative outlet in some way, I wouldn't be very happy.

Warren: I got the impression from talking to John that this is an important way that you guys have come up with: a strategy for maintaining the family farm. The operation has just continued to diversify through the years. Is that the way you see it?

Ackerman: Absolutely. I mean, we had to diversify, or we would lose it. I mean, it just wouldn't happen. And it doesn't mean there aren't still farm loans (laughs) that scare us to death; it doesn't mean that. It just means we had to come up with some other way. It also doesn't mean that our children are going to choose to do this. Our two oldest have no—I mean, they help, and they're just as good to slide right in and pick up the slack when we need them to—but their interests are really elsewhere. And our youngest two? Well, they're only ten and twelve, so who knows. But we'd like to at least give them that option, that when the time comes, if they want to, it's available to them and it wasn't just sold off because we couldn't keep it anymore, we couldn't make it viable.

Warren: Now if you look at the history of farming sort of in the last thirty or forty years—and there's been tremendous changes—how do you feel about the changes that have affected families between that time and the present day.

Ackerman: Well, I'm not sure if I'm really good enough to speak on that because I've only been doing this here for fourteen years. So I don't know that I have a great enough background, because I only spent summers on my grandparents' farm. I know how hard that was for them to scrape a living. And they lived very, very simply—much simpler than what we live here, and I know much simpler than what John's family lived thirty, forty years ago. I think it's morphed into a big business versus the small farms. And a lot of it, the kids on the farms growing up have so many more options, so many more opportunities available to them. I don't know that that's a bad thing; it's just different. It's not like you're going to be a millionaire farming unless you're farming the mega-acres, and that seems to be the mindset. Everybody wants to have the vacation home somewhere else and the grand lifestyle. Well, you're not going to get that if you farm.

Warren: Yeah. Looking at the diversity of this farm and all the operations you had, I wondered how you manage to keep up and keep your sanity from day to day.

Ackerman: I don't. (laughter) I don't. I'm really pleased that there are things like laptops and accounting programs; doesn't mean I like them, doesn't mean I'm very good at it. But we've had to make adjustments. It doesn't mean we're going to have a home-cooked meal every night. We've had to make adjustments for things. John has to do things now that he probably wasn't doing ten years ago with the kids because I'm not always here anymore—not that I was always here ten years ago; I was usually working somewhere else. But we have to work together to get it done. And if that means I have to put on jeans and work boots and go pick pumpkins, then I have to do that; and if he has to learn how to get behind the counter and ring somebody up, then he has to—we all have to wear—it's up to him and I to pretty much wear all of the hats. And that's my biggest worry: if something happens to one of us, I worry that the farm won't survive.

Warren: So that's one of the biggest challenges here, is to maintain the family farm?

Ackerman: Absolutely. If one of us goes down, my fear is everything goes down.

Warren: Let's look into the future. What changes do you think you might see in farming, say in the next ten or twenty years?

Ackerman: In farming?

Warren: Yeah.

Ackerman: Well, I'm confident that the trend is, at least right now, seeming to swing back to buy local, buy local. And there's so many health benefits that have been out in the news in the last year or two about how much more beneficial it is to you, health-wise, to eat local produce, and buy from your local area and your local farmer; you don't have to age your food so much before you get it. I understand the global economy, and I understand the need to be a global community, but I also understand community responsibility, if you will. So I'm encouraged by the atmosphere of community responsibility and helping your local farmer or artisan or whoever. That's been huge for us, because we have tremendous support from our local communities—and it's not just Morton. The longer we're here, the more it seems to spider out, if you will. We have people who are bringing their kids, and they want to come back every year because it's a tradition, and they recognize that it's our tradition here, too. So I'm encouraged by that.

Warren: One other thing: John mentioned that you had a green thumb. Can you tell us (Ackerman laughs) a little bit about your gardening?

Ackerman: I don't have a green thumb. (laughter) No. I don't know. My grandmother could stick anything in the ground, and it would grow. I like to garden. I don't

necessarily have the time that I'd like to spend to garden, but I like to garden. And I don't know. My mom says I get it from her mother, because I didn't get it from my mom. So I don't know.

Warren: What all's in your garden?

Ackerman: Just depends. Mostly it's just tomatoes and green peppers, and we try different things. I really like to have fresh-cut flowers around, so. I was sorry when I had to leave the South because I left my azaleas and hydrangeas that were everywhere, and different flowering trees that I loved. And that, I was sad to see go by the wayside. But then there's the prairie flowers now that have kind of caught me. So I like to do mostly native landscaping, if you will—something that I know will take and prosper here. I learned. (laughs) Dogwoods don't do so well in Illinois. (laughter) Azaleas don't do so well, either.

Warren: How about mums?

Ackerman: Mums do really well—really, really well. (laughter)

Warren: But you work at it, I understand.

Ackerman: Yeah, if you work at it. Yep. There have been times that we've skated between rows on a little scooter that you use for automobiles—(laughs) or my kid's skateboard one year. I was sitting on the skateboard, scooting between rows, pinching mums as we went. (laughs) No pictures were taken. (laughter)

Warren: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Ackerman: No, I think we've about covered everything.

Warren: Okay, good. Thank you very much.

Ackerman: Sure, thank you.

Warren: It's been a real pleasure—

Ackerman: Thank you.

Warren: —speaking with you. Thanks a lot.

(end of interview)