

Interview with Russ Jeckel and Scott Jeckel

AIS-V-L-2008-023.02

Interview # 1: May 15, 2008

Interviewer: Dick Hall

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

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.

Hull: Well, I'd like now to introduce Scott Jeckel. Scott is the youngest son of Russ and Mary. He is the operator of the hog confinement and the farming operation here at the Jeckel Pork Farm in Delavan. We're at the confinement houses at this present time, and we'll go through those in a minute. But first, I'd like to ask Scott a question, and that is, what advice would you give a young person today that has a strong aspiration of becoming a pork producer? Can you answer that for us?

S. Jeckel: Well, I think it's certainly a difficult time. We're right now, as we speak today, in probably some of the roughest time we've had maybe in history. I think to start on your own is next to impossible if not impossible. I think if you're really interested, you'd probably have to try to partner up with somebody who was doing it. There are those people out there with operations that they're looking for young people with a desire to work and get that done. But it's a tough time.

Hull: Things have changed in the last forty or fifty years, I guess, since your Dad was head of the operation. What were some of those changes that's happened?

S. Jeckel: Well, I think—gosh. When you add the forty or fifty years that Russ has been doing this, I mean, my gosh. You've gone from a very young industry to a pretty mature industry that's consolidated dramatically. It used to be everybody, or a lot of people, had ten or twenty hogs, or a hundred hogs. Now, the top twenty producers probably raise some fifty or sixty million hogs, making it change

dramatically. It's not a small business anymore; it's capital intensive, takes a lot of money to get in and stay in.

Hull: Now, at the present time you're not farrowing pigs here, right?

S. Jeckel: We are not.

Hull: Yeah. You bring these pigs in at what size?

S. Jeckel: Pigs come in at about three weeks of age, so anywhere from maybe fifteen to twenty-two, twenty-three days, and then we house them and raise them to pigs that'll weigh 280 pounds, average, possibly. In that ballpark.

Hull: Okay, okay. Anything else to add to the group?

S. Jeckel: Well, you know, I know one of your questions that you had is, we as an industry have created a business where we all have contractual obligations to markets, to plants that are processing these pigs. We don't react. I think we've created our own mess, we producers, we bankers, we the hog killers, processors, we don't react to true economics. We react at, "Hey, we've got to produce fifty pigs next week whether it's going to make us money or lose us money," and I think that's some of the real problems that we've got with profitability and long-term viability of the business. I think if we'd have done some things earlier and changed how we do business, you'd see a lot more people spread out, a lot of ownership still in the hands of more people instead in the hands of very few.

Hull: Do you see any resolution to this?

S. Jeckel: I'm not sure. I think it's a little late. I think we're going to follow the model of the poultry industry and you'll see continued consolidation, and you may get down to a point where there's only half a dozen or less people raising some 80, 90 percent of the pigs.

Hull: Okay, okay, well, thanks for your comment. We'll go inside the building now.

R. Jeckel: This is a good building to do this in, isn't it?

M: We'll live.

Hull: Tell me about the size of these things right now.

S. Jeckel: I'll take a guess and see these will average about a hundred-sixty to eighty pounds right now.

Hull: And you said they were brought in at about two weeks of age?

S. Jeckel: These actually were brought in as feeder pigs. We just made a change from one company to another that we're growing for. We currently don't own any of these pigs but rather do it on a contractual basis; these were brought in as feeder pigs

about a month ago, a little over a month ago. Five weeks ago. And they came in at about, they probably averaged sixty-five, seventy pounds.

Hull: I see. But you're contract feeding these, though, is that right?

S. Jeckel: We are feeding these on a contractual basis, that is correct.

Hull: And that means that whoever owns them brings in the feed and you feed them and you get so much per pig?

S. Jeckel: We get so much per pig space. We get a monthly check for the same amount. For that we provide labor, management, the facilities, gas, electric, management I guess maybe I said. They provide the pig, feed, veterinarian services, medicine, that covers most of it in general.

Hull: And where are these pigs processed, then?

S. Jeckel: These pigs will be processed at Beardstown, Cargill.

Hull: I see.

(overlapping dialogue)

Hull: How many pigs do you have in this facility now?

S. Jeckel: Typically, we call this a thousand-head finisher. Currently, there's a few less. There were about 750, so we're at about three quarters capacity of this building right now.

Hull: Now, you won't put any more in here, is that right?

S. Jeckel: We will not put any more. They just brought us a few less.

Hull: Where's your feed made at?

S. Jeckel: The feed for these pigs is brought in from Roanoke, Illinois, about forty-five miles northeast of here. It comes in via semi truck. We don't produce any feed on the farm, haven't for about five years. They have the capability to do some things that we can't.

Hull: Will you discuss a little bit about your bio-security, what do you do to prevent bringing in any diseases, and so on and so forth?

S. Jeckel: We try to. Bio-security being the question. We try to have limited access to the facilities. Really we have no outside folks that come in other than people that are involved with the raising of the pigs, our employees and some other managers, ownership. Typically, I wouldn't be in here in jeans. I'd be in here in a pair of coveralls with rubber boots that can get washed, and when we go between buildings, we will continue to wash boots, those sorts of things for bio-security.

The pigs: we never commingle any types of other hogs from any other operation, or if you go off the farm you've got to change clothes, change shoes, et cetera.

Hull: I see screens on the ventilation on the outside. Is that screen for the birds and varmints I guess?

S. Jeckel: No—for the screens, yes. I mean, you can see we have, there's a five-foot curtain on each side of this building for ventilation. It's giving you guys a lot of nice air in here. There are a few things that birds carry, some diseases that we don't typically have anymore because we do this. It doesn't allow them in, therefore they don't have droppings in here, the pigs don't pick up some of the things they carry. It also, as you said, also keeps out coons, other kinds of wild animals.

R. Jeckel: Is this pig about full?

S. Jeckel: But if I don't pump this out, I may just pump it to one of the other buildings just to get it down. Those two are real, real good shape.

R. Jeckel: You have to agitate this building or what do you do?

S. Jeckel: Yeah, you agitate them, but even then I don't know how much good it'll do.

R. Jeckel: Well, it's got a build up in it?

S. Jeckel: Yeah.

R. Jeckel: How much?

S. Jeckel: Got it down to five feet. It's a little pump, it's just solid.

R. Jeckel: Someday you'll have to work on that, huh?

S. Jeckel: Yeah. I'm sure that they want to know this for their tape. (laughter)

R. Jeckel: Here, piggy.

S. Jeckel: Wide.

R. Jeckel: Huh?

S. Jeckel: Really broad, aren't they?

R. Jeckel: Yeah. Broader than _____ (??)?

S. Jeckel: Yeah, I think so. I'm not even sure what genetics they are.

Hull: (dialogue unintelligible due to machinery noises) Is it going to hurt the diversity of the kind of pork now? I mean, is it going to reduce the different types of pig that are bred?

R. Jeckel: Absolutely. I mean, genetically, you probably—I mean, I don't know exactly—but if you were here genetically forty years ago, you're here genetically now; most animals being raised are coming out of a very few highly selected animals, I would say. You know, again, I don't know what percentage is, but it's narrowed dramatically from where it was fifty years ago.

Hull: That's what you have to live with but is it what you want?

R. Jeckel: They're certainly a more difficult animal to raise. I mean, fifty years ago—even when I came back. I've been home on the farm about twenty-four, twenty-five years, we had an animal that was a lot fatter. And when I say fatter, he had a coat of grease on his back, you know; he might have had an inch of back fat. These pigs might have two, three tenths of back fat. And I don't know specifically if that's the exact reason, but they are a more fragile animal. You've got to handle them differently. Those old animals, you could do a lot of things and they would grow. Unfortunately, they didn't produce as much meat and they weren't nearly as efficient using feed to produce meat, but they were an easier animal to raise.

Hull: Can you talk about the difference between what Russ was getting, what kind of inputs you had through an operation like this, what kind of inputs do they have in the operation today?

S. Jeckel: Well, I think we've traded, as in most business. In an immature business, you use a lot of labor, and as you get into a mature business like this, you trade overhead, buildings, curtains, you know, slats, for labor. There's a higher cost but fewer people can raise more animals and do it well and efficiently. So I think that's the maturing, probably the biggest difference.

Hull: Does your dad have an opinion on that?

R. Jeckel: What's that?

S. Jeckel: He asked how things have changed, and I said labor versus overhead has probably been the most dramatic difference. What do you think?

R. Jeckel: Absolutely. Yeah, no question.

S. Jeckel: And you were on the cusp of that change, right?

R. Jeckel: Right.

(pause in recording)

R. Jeckel: Case in point, there was an auction out west of town, where 380 side-by-side brought right, see, 8,000 an acre.

Hull: Eight thousand an acre.

S. Jeckel: I go when they're paying 40,000.

Hull: Yeah, what I was I going to say, but that's farmland they're paying 8,000 dollars for.

S. Jeckel: That's farmland. This is not (unintelligible ??). And some not so good farmland. I mean, good farmland, but not the best farmland.

R. Jeckel: Can you imagine? Mary and I are trying to make some estate plans. Can you imagine how it affects that?

Hull: Oh God.

R. Jeckel: It's unbelievable, you know?

(pause in audio)

M: Still rolling.

Hull: Okay, we're back at the home place here, and Russ, can you tell us about this? We're looking at the old dairy barn here, and that was one of the older buildings that was here when your dad moved here? Is that right?

R. Jeckel: Yes. We think it was built around the same time as the old tenant house, in the twenties, thereabouts.

Hull: And it was converted many years ago to a farrowing unit, is that not right?

R. Jeckel: Yes. It had a basement which was pretty good, and we put some farrowing crates and some holding pens in there, and a little gas heat, and it was just so much better than farrowing outside in individual buildings. We would run quite a number through there every month, and then of course we had to take them out to those double A houses which we had a picture of earlier on, out in the field. But it was pretty pleasant down there, a high labor type thing, had to move everything, sawdust bedding, had to move everything by hand.

Hull: You say this is one of the first attempts of putting sows in confinement and farrowing them?

R. Jeckel: Well, I don't know that I can say that. The situation that we found ourselves in was that we had to – because of low capital availability – we had to use what we had and that's the way we went. And then, I don't know whether you remember the term, Dick, a pig hatchery? That's what we called ourselves, and we would sell these little pigs and let somebody else—early on—finish them out. Then as we grew, then we began to finish them out, you know, and could expand that way.

Hull: Yes, yes, and I think that we saw that just now, where these pigs were brought in as small pigs and then they're finished out by finishers.

R. Jeckel: Right. Right, right. There's a lot of specialization now. People that just specially farrow and then somebody else in the organization takes them and finishes them out.

Hull: Yes, yes. Now, why don't we look at one of the older type of confinement facilities you have here?

R. Jeckel: Okay. It's right behind us.

Hull: Now, this building, it was probably one of the early concepts of a farrowing unit in that time, is that not time? What's the age of this building?

R. Jeckel: Well, it was built in the late fifties. It had long narrow pens and it was an attempt to try to take some labor out of the thing so that we didn't have to move them to the field, you know? And as Scott said, it was converted to finishing, and it's just been within the last month or so that we moved the pigs. We won't be using this building in the future, but it had pigs in it a long time. Since the fifties.

Hull: What was the capacity, sow capacity in this?

R. Jeckel: Dick, that's a good question. I'm not sure. I suppose sixty times four, probably sixty sows and their litters or so, something like that. I'm not sure.

Hull: And it was later converted over to a finisher, is that right?

R. Jeckel: Yeah, yeah. It still has a section of slats and it has a section of solid parts. It's really not ideal, not like the total slatted buildings over there, but once again, you have to kind of use what you have.

Hull: It was an older concept of confinement?

R. Jeckel: Yeah.

Hull: My understanding is that it was just vacated recently?

R. Jeckel: Yes, yes, in the last—I think in the last few weeks, really.

Hull: So it's been having pigs in it for over fifty years?

R. Jeckel: Yeah, right. Right, right.

Hull: Okay. Can we peek inside this one?

R. Jeckel: I don't think there's anything—

(end of interview)