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Abstract: Ray Ackerman was born on January 7, 1918, on the Ackerman family farm near Morton, Illinois. He was the third of four children and lived on the farm until he went off to college in 1939. Ray attended grade school at a one-room country schoolhouse located 0.8 mile east of the farm. The road to school was paved in 1924, and Ray generally made the trip on roller skates, a scooter, a bike, or a horse. At home, Ray and his older brother Clyde helped with the chores. Ray's jobs included milking cows by hand, gathering and tabulating chicken eggs, and, at age 12, working as a water boy for neighborhood farm crews threshing wheat, oats, and barley. The Ackermans used horses for planting, cultivating, and harvesting until about 1930, when they purchased a Case tractor. Ray's father had to refinance the farm during the Great Depression (1929-1940). The family never went hungry. They adapted to the crisis by increasing the size of the dairy herd and by raising beef cattle, hogs, and chickens to supplement their cash income. Brother Clyde took over the farm when their father retired, and turned it over to his son, John, in 1983. Ray took a different path. He obtained a Civil Engineering degree from the University of Illinois, served as a Merchant Marine in World War II, and then worked as a highway engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Keywords: Ackerman Farms; Centennial Farm; drainage tile; alfalfa, clover, corn, wheat, oats, barley; thresher; crop rotation; milk cows, beef cattle, horses, pigs, chickens, sheep; manure; one-room schoolhouse; Great Depression; Apostolic Church; chinch bugs; Case tractor; Ford Model T; trapping; University of Illinois; World War II; Merchant Marines; gender roles; environmental impact; family farm; 4-H.

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Interview with Ray Ackerman

ISM_01_AckermanRay

Interview # 1: December 19, 2007
Interviewer: Robert Warren

Warren: Ray's here. Is the sound going to be okay, do you think? Okay. Okay, we're here to interview Mr. Ray Ackerman. It's December 19, 2007. We're at Ackerman Farms near Morton, Illinois in Tazewell County, and we'll be interviewing Mr. Ackerman about his experiences in agriculture. Ray, could you tell us your full name and your age and date of birth, please?

Ackerman: Raymond J. Ackerman. I'm eighty-nine years old, approaching ninety. I was born January 7, 1918.

Warren: So you've got a birthday coming up next month.

Ackerman: Yes, right.

Warren: Congratulations in advance for that.

Ackerman: Thank you.

Warren: Can you tell us about your birthplace and your immediate family, your mom and dad?

Ackerman: Well, I was born in this house in the middle of a snowstorm. The road out in front here was blocked, and I always said it took two doctors: a veterinarian, which we called a horse doctor back then, and a medical doctor, and they couldn't get through the road so the horse doctor went through the fields and cut the fences and drove the horse and buggy to get here for my birth. Well, they were a little late! (laughter) They didn't quite make it before I was born!

Warren: So how many years did you live in this house? Your childhood or all of your childhood?

Ackerman: I lived here until I went to college, and after I was through with college I worked in Chicago for a couple years and didn't see much future in Chicago so I wanted to move back to Morton, and came back here until we were married, and that was in 1948. And we lived in an upstairs of a farmhouse just north of Morton that my aunt and uncle owned, and we lived there for about three years, and then we moved out back into this farmhouse, and we lived here from 1951 to 1957. After that, we moved into Morton.

Warren: Can we back up and talk about your early childhood? Tell us about your father and your mother and any siblings?

Ackerman: Well, my father and mother were married in 1913, and they built this house, and it was completed in 1913, probably in the summer or fall of 1913.

Warren: Okay, could we stop this for a second? Can we pause this? (pause in recording)

Ackerman: They built this house in 1913, and prior to that there was another old farmhouse that was out back about 100 feet from this one that they lived in for about six months, and of course that farmhouse, I don't know when it was built, some years ago, and my grandfather helped all his children acquire farms, and I think he gave farms to his daughters, two daughters, because they

didn't have much chance to make money back in those days, but he made provisions, so helped buy them and made provisions so they all could acquire farms. And the old farmhouse I think then was turned to a chicken house, and it's a little vague—I thought at one time that it was moved into Morton or maybe one part of it was moved into Morton and the other part was torn down, and we always had lumber that we used for other things that came from somewhere, probably from the old house, at least part of it.

Warren: Could you just—let's see... Could you talk a little bit about the house itself?

Ackerman: Well, it's a ten-room house. How many bedrooms? There are five bedrooms, and there was a bathroom was at the far end of the hall upstairs. My grandfather helped design the house, and he said, "Well, that's the place for the bathroom because it's right above the kitchen and you don't need as many pipes, saves on plumbing." And it was not very convenient. And then, several years later they built a little addition on off of the kitchen where they had a half bath there, and it's now been turned into a pantry because it was not that well insulated and the pipes would often freeze. What now is the bathroom used to be a pantry where we stored all our food, and at the far end was the icebox, which is accessible from both the inside and the outside. The iceman would come and he didn't have to come in the house; he could put the ice in from the outside. And see, there was a full attic, walk-in attic, and we used it to dry seed corn. My dad would keep the best ears of corn for seed corn, and we'd string 'em up on twine and hang 'em from the rafters so the mice wouldn't get at them.

Warren: So that was in the attic of the main house.

Ackerman: That was the attic of this house.

Warren: You mentioned your grandparents. Could you tell us a little about them?

Ackerman: Well, my grandparents lived on a farm that is across the road and west of here towards Tennessee Avenue, which is the next street, and he farmed there for a number of years, and that became a centennial farm in 1972, and they did have another I think eighty acres adjacent to this farm, and my grandfather sold that to someone, and they were living in the old house at that time. I think—I don't know if it was after my parents were married or before, probably before—and he got paid off in silver dollars and carried 'em in a grain sack across the field to his house and put it under his bed for the night, and the next morning he hooked up the horse and buggy and took all these silver dollars into the bank! (laughter) My dad did, of course, the farming with horses to begin with, and he always prided himself in having straight corn rows, and he concentrated on that, and he always taught me you headed towards a point. You have to line it up with something beyond that, so you have three points in a line so you don't deviate. And they had the old wires on the corn planters, which would trip the planters so you'd have a hill of corn. About three or four kernels of corn would drop for a hill, and then with the wires you had rows in both directions, so when you cultivated you'd cultivate one direction and then you'd cross-cultivate, and then the third one was a final one, and you call that "laying by". You always say you try to lay by by the Fourth of July, and then you shuck corn by hand, and you had the horses would draw your wagon and bunk board, which were high boards in the back of the wagon, you throw your ears of corn against the bunk board and fill the wagon. And we had hired men and we had some of them that were brothers; they could shuck 100 bushel a day, which was pretty good, and my dad, he could shuck about eighty bushel a day, which wasn't bad, either, and then you would—they had an old scale where you'd weigh it to see what crops were, and then when they harvested the corn there was a corn crib, and he had ear corn, which

you stored, and there are spaces between the boards so air would circulate through the corn so it would dry. He didn't have to burn up all his gas as they do nowadays to dry corn. And the elevator, to run the elevator you'd have a car and you'd have cylinders, two cylinders for each wheel, and the back wheels would rotate these cylinders, and the front was blocked so the car wouldn't move, and then pulleys to run the elevator in the corn crib.

Warren: What period of time are we talking about with the—

Ackerman: Well, we're talking about—

Warren: Were those Model Ts or Model As?

Ackerman: He had a Model T one time, and they ran this elevator with, and I think it was about 1937 when he installed an electric motor in the corn crib to run the elevators, and he didn't need this Model T anymore, so he sold it to me for $15, a 1922 Sport Roadster, and it was fifteen years old at the time, and that was my first car. Cost me $15! (laughter)

Warren: What was that like to drive, the Model T?

Ackerman: Oh, it was fine. It was a little different driving it. You had one pedal for the brake and one for low and one for reverse. When you get in a tight spot I'd hit all three of 'em at the same time! (laughter)

Warren: So your grandparents lived nearby when you were growing up.

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: Were there other relatives living nearby, as well?

Ackerman: Yes, yes. I had... My uncle lived on the home place, and then there was another uncle that lived south of Morton, and one uncle lived east of here several miles, and he had a farm there.

Warren: Are they all on your father's side?

Ackerman: Yes, these are all on my father's side. And then my aunts, they each had a farm. Well, one was where my uncle lived, south of Morton along 121, which is now I-155, Interstate 155, and Sam lived there, and his farm was at Warsaw, Illinois over west. And older brother was from Utah, and I don't know if he ever had a farm or not. He lived in Utah for a while and then he moved back to Peoria and worked at Keystone Wire Company.

Warren: It's interesting that you had so many relatives living nearby. Did you get together occasionally?

Ackerman: Oh, yes. Yes, often. Often, yes.

Warren: Family dinners, I would guess.

Ackerman: Oh, yes. Yes, and my aunts lived in Morton then later, and it was about a block from the high school, so all of their nieces and nephews would go there for lunch in high school, just a block away from high school.

Warren: Could you think back to your childhood days? So you were born in 1908?

Ackerman: 1918! (laughter)

Warren: (laughter) Oh, that's right, you're turning ninety, not 100!

Ackerman: Right, not quite!

Warren: I failed math! But 1918, and what was your childhood like here on the farm?

Ackerman: Well, of course, I was pretty much on my own, and I'd kind of invent my own games. We used to play croquet. We had croquet out here on the side of the house, and I'd have a league, and I kept track of the wins and loss by colors, and I'd have win and loss. And I'd have league standings by colors, and orange and blue always won, and that was before I knew that they were Illinois colors! (laughter)

Warren: So you've been an Illinois rooter all your life, before you realized it!

Ackerman: Right! And then I'd invent games of baseball. I'd throw a golf ball against the steps that were out here, these concrete steps, and didn't know which way it was going to bounce but if it hit the edge of the steps it'd bounce way out, and there used to be a fence out here, a four foot fence, and if it went over the fence it was a home run, if it hit the fence in the fly it was a triple, and if it hit it on the ground it was a double, and if I caught it it was an out, and I'd have full games (laughter) and I'd keep score, and maybe take a week or two to finish it! Another game I had was another baseball game. We had a gravel drive, and our machine shed was back away from the road. It was a little ways; it was over 100 feet. And I'd get in the middle of that drive with a broomstick and pick up stones off the drive and try to hit 'em over the machine shed. Over the machine shed was a home run. If it hit the roof it was a triple, and other signs [rules]. I'd have games there, too.

Warren: And you had some siblings that came along, right?

Ackerman: Yes. I had an older brother. He was born in 1914, and my sister—in April of 1914—my sister was born in September of 1915, and I was born in 1918, and then I had a younger sister that was born in, let's see, 1933. She was fifteen years younger. And so she was, my older sister was probably about ready for... Well, she was in high school, and let's see—my sister and I, we played games, too, and the three of us, my brother Clyde and my sister.

Warren: Did you have chores on the farm, too?

Ackerman: Oh, yes! Yes, we had... My brother was older so he always seemed to have more chores than I did, but we milked cows, and I used to gather the eggs and keep track of all the eggs, and I still found records of how many eggs were lain in a certain year, (laughter) and I was quite a record keeper!

Warren: So you kept of all these things?

Ackerman: I kept track of all these things, yes.

Warren: And how about friends? You ever...? How far are you from Morton out here?

Ackerman: Well, it was—the city limits have come out this way, but I think we said it was 1.9 miles into Morton, and I sometimes would have friends come out to play with me from Morton, and I went to a one-room country school which was 8/10ths of a mile east of here, and I used to... Well, in 1924 the highway was paved out in front of the house. I was six years old. And then when I went to school I roller-skated oftentimes. I would—(clears throat) excuse me... I wore out a number of steel wheels on my roller-skates because the pavement was a little rough. I had a scooter that I used sometimes, and that worked pretty well, especially when—there was a hill coming home and you'd coast down the hill. And later I had a bicycle. On occasion I rode a horse.

Warren: So you got yourself to school year-round, basically.

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: How many grades were in that school?

Ackerman: Eight grades.

Warren: Eight grades?

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: So once you got to ninth grade you went to Morton—

Ackerman: Went to Morton High School, Morton Township High School, yeah.

Warren: Okay, do you have any recollections of what school was like, the one 8/10ths of a mile away.

Ackerman: It was a one-room country school, and, of course, your schoolteacher, she also had to fire the furnace, get there early and fire the furnace in the wintertime, and they had outside bathrooms, and then finally they had indoor bathrooms with a tank, and I was... I graduated ahead of my grade in class. I was the only one! There were about twenty in the school. And when my brother and sister were there—my brother started, he was three years ahead of me, and when he started school my sister wanted to go, too. She was two weeks under less than five years old, so they let her go. She saw the kids playing out at recess and she thought that's what school was all about, so she wanted to go there, but they had it pretty nice 'cause they were very close then, 'cause they were all through grade school and high school together in the same class. And the different country schools had baseball teams; baseball was the big thing back then, and the country schools all had a baseball team, and that's when I was younger, and my brother and sister, they played, and then some of the younger kids, they played on one side of the school at recess, and then some of us younger ones played on the other side. But by the time I got to the upper grades, they didn't have the competition with the other schools anymore.

Warren: So how about the teachers? You recall any of your teachers? Did you have teachers for all those grades, or...?

Ackerman: Well, the first two grades... Well, I was a little different, that I was six years old in January so I didn't start the year before, but it came about March and they decided, well, talked to the teacher whether I could start, so I did, so my first grade was only about two months, 'cause you had March and April, then school was out because it was time to do farm work, and so I spent two months in the first grade, and Amelia Oekell was my teacher. And sometimes you remember your second grade teachers, and I remember my second grade teacher; I liked her. I proposed to her in the second grade, and I thought she agreed, she was going to wait for me, but when I was in about the fourth or fifth grade she got married (laughter) and I thought she betrayed me! And my mother kind of consoled me, said, "Well, she'd be too old by the time you're ready." Then I had Salome Dominick for four years, and she had a boyfriend, Alfred B. Carius, so she drove his car, and it had ABC on it, and I was reading ABC, said, "Oh, are you learning your alphabet?" (laughter) Then I had my seventh and eighth grade Hollinger, [Esther] Hollinger, and she was there for two years, I had her for two years. And country schools, I don't know, the quote "city kids" thought the country kids were dumb. They didn't have things, and I think they were way ahead of the city schools because you sat there and they had

a recitation bench at the front of the room, and you'd hear everything all classes. By the time you got to the upper grades it was old hat and wasn't that difficult.

Warren: How about the transition to the high school? So you started freshman year in Morton?

Ackerman: Yep, I started in Morton. There ended up twenty-four that graduated in our class, and we had our seventieth reunion here a couple years ago. There were four there.

Warren: Did you take your roller-skates to the high school? (laughter)

Ackerman: (laughter) No! The first year my brother had a car. He was a senior, he and my sister were seniors, and he drove my first year, and the other three years there was someone that lived out east of us, southeast of us, and I rode with them for three years.

Warren: How about youth organizations? Were you in 4H or FFA?

Ackerman: Well, yes, we had 4H club, and the first—when I was younger, my brother had cattle. My brother was always more interested in farming than I was. I was more interested in outdoors, hunting, trapping, that type of thing, but we had 4H projects, and my first year I had a pig barrow, and of course I won first place in the county fair then, because it was the only one! (laughter) And then we had calves for several years. My brother had calves in 4H and I had a couple calves, and they had the fair every year, and we didn't have that quality of calves that we bought. Some of them bought purebred Angus or Hereford, Angus I think were the ones, and they always ended up winning the first place because they had better stock to begin with, and we bought 'em and didn't want to pay that much for them, [didn't] think we could afford them. The Depression came along in 1932, and that was pretty devastating on the family. I can tell you about that. That's kind of a story in itself. First I'll go back a little, and my parents were quite religious, and they have the Apostolic Church here in Morton, which is a break-off of the old Mennonites. A lot of them that weren't in the church called them the Amish; they weren't really Amish, but they had tendencies towards their rules where they're rather strict, and when my parents were first married they were not members of the church, and I think it was about 1924 when I was about six years old, maybe a little bit before that when they joined the church. My dad had always smoked a pipe, and I can still remember his red cans of Prince Albert tobacco, and he smoked this pipe, and one time I thought, Oh, gosh, that's pretty good! I can blow bubbles! So I used his pipe to blow bubbles, and my mother told me it wasn't the thing to do. My dad never said anything; I think he realized maybe that was a better use for it, but when he joined the church the pipe went aside, and he had quite a time, I guess, his addiction for tobacco. But he did [quit], he stuck with it. And my mother said he'd pace the hall at night sometimes, but he did! (laughter) He would always do anything for us, he's always—and helping each other. And getting back to this religion, they're a close-knit group. And there was someone—and my recollection is a little vague 'cause I was not that old, and my parents never talked about it—but there was someone that wanted to start a company, and I think it was Eagle Manufacturing, and I believe they were going to make farm equipment, and people from the church would sign up as shareholders, and they put their farms up as collateral. Well, the Depression came along and the business failed. It went into bankruptcy, and they foreclosed on all the farmers, and my parents as well as [his] brothers and another number of people around Morton had to refinance their property and get a mortgage and start over again, where they had owned the farm, and now they were hit with this.

Warren: So your father owned the farm outright at that point?

Ackerman: At that point, yes. And then to supplement the income, we got to start doing other things, and we had one or two milk cows for our own use. Now we started, we got more, about eight or ten cows, and sold milk, and to supplement the income. He also fed beef cattle. He'd buy calves and then feed them out and try to make a profit that way to supplement his income. He was always a hard worker. He always had some hogs he raised, and we had chickens. And then we started raising chickens, having eggs for the hatchery, and then you could get a little better price for them.

Warren: Where was the hatchery?

Ackerman: It was in Morton. Yeah, there was quite a hatchery there for a long time, Waldbeser's (laughter)

Warren: Well, that kind of gets into the farming aspect of things. So you graduated from high school. Did you come back to work on the farm, or did you continue on to college?

Ackerman: Well, like I said, they used horses, and you'd plow, and I think I have a vague recollection of still plowing with horses that my dad did, and I think he had five horses to pull the plow, and then he bought a tractor. He bought a Case, J.I. Case, bought a tractor, and oh, I was probably about ten years old. By the time I was twelve I was driving the tractor in the field and doing farm work. And I liked—

Warren: Roughly 1930?

Ackerman: Yes. And I liked this tractor that we had, 'cause it had a hand clutch, and when I also then would drive my uncle's tractor and they had a International Harvester, which had a foot clutch, I could barely reach (laughter) 'cause I was always short! I remember when I was in grade school I had the smallest desk in the room, and they put a 2x4 under it so I could touch the floor 'cause I couldn't touch the floor. Anyway, we got the tractor, and first it had lugs so you couldn't drive it on the pavement, and then later we had rubber-tired tractors so you could drive it on the pavement.

Warren: So it had metal wheels and rims to begin with, and got rubber later on.

Ackerman: Yeah. And then they had—well, we always had a horse and buggy, 'cause my dad had a car when he was about, I think about 1925, but sometimes roads were muddy or something; we'd use the horse and buggy. And I know one time the road was blocked here and we went through the field to the next road, which that road was open to go to church one Sunday, and then we finally got into getting a corn picker, and we had a two row corn picker. And I didn't do a lot of shucking corn, but to open the field—some corn pickers was mounted on the tractor, but ours wasn't. The tractor was off to the side, so you had to shuck the outside rows by hand, and I got involved in that more, and not so much when they shucked by hand. And so I think I wasn't too adept at shucking corn. My dad kind of taught me how to do it. He says, "When you shuck one ear you don't have to look at it all the time. You look ahead where the next ear is. So when you're done this ear, you don't have to be looking; you throw it in the wagon, you're reaching for the next ear." Well, that's a lesson I learned, and not only in shucking corn but looking ahead and things you're going to do in your lifetime.

Warren: Could you describe the farm layout? We're sitting in the old farmhouse right now. What kind of barns and sheds and other buildings were out here?

Ackerman: Okay. There was a—I have some pictures that show it, and there's also an aerial photograph that shows it, but the driveway was where it's always been, and at the back end of the driveway was the machine shed, and that also was where we kept our car, which is 100 feet or more from the house; it wasn't an attached garage. And to the right, which would be east, before you got to the machine shed was the barn, and that's where we always made hay, put up hay there, and to the east of that at one time there was another kind of a cowshed we called it, and that was torn down when, oh, probably when I was in my early teens, and then closer to the road was the corn crib. And next, and between the barn and the corn crib we had a water tank, and west of the barn was a well. We have a shallow bricked well, and it never went dry. It always had water. And we had a pump, electric pump in the basement, and we would pump water out to the stock tank, and he also had hydrants out by the barn, and then later they built a hog house. It was just on this side of where the gift shop is now, and there were hydrants in the hog house. Later that hog house was split in half that was used as a chicken house, and when we started having milking cows we would run the pump to pump water into the tank so you'd have cold water coming right out of the well to cool the milk, and he had a tool about, oh, with a piece of metal about six or eight inches in diameter that you'd push up and down to stir the milk so it would cool, and by the time the milk got cooled then you'd put the lids on.

Warren: Was the milking all done in the barn, or...?

Ackerman: The milking was all done in the barn by hand.

Warren: Were the cows out in pasture during the day?

Ackerman: Yes, they were out in pasture during the day. You'd open the barn door and they'd come in. We had stanchions for them; each cow knew where it belonged and go to that place. And the milkman would—we'd have them [the milk] in ten gallon cans and the milkman would pick them up and take them into Peoria and we'd sell the milk.

Warren: Was there a dairy in Peoria that you—

Ackerman: Yes, a Producer's Dairy in Peoria, which was kind of a farm cooperative, and then there was Roselle's, too, in Peoria, which was another place, but we always went to Producer's 'cause it was a farm cooperative.

Warren: What was your milking cycle like? Did you do it once a day or twice a day?

Ackerman: Twice a day, twice a day, except we had one cow, [Old] Grandma we called her, which was a Holstein, and it would produce about ten gallon of milk a day, and sometimes we'd milk it three times a day, and it produced a lot but the quality wasn't that great. You got paid by the butterfat content, and if it was less than 3% it was docked, and I think that had ten gallon a day but I think it tested 2.7%, and that was almost like skim milk now. Now they want, everybody wants skim milk. We used to get some of the skim milk back from the dairy and feed it to the hogs, 'cause it was cheap! Then we also had Guernseys and Jerseys, which up to 7% butterfat, and that would bring the—so your overall content would be better, but they didn't produce near as many gallons, but you get about the same amount of butterfat that you got paid for. And there were good years and bad years, sometimes a drought, and one year they had the chinch bugs, and the chinch bugs would get in wheat fields, and then when the wheat started maturing, then they'd come over into the corn fields. So to prevent them from getting into the corn fields we'd plow a furrow and put Creosote along there, and that would stop them. But some of the crops out here, returns were very low because of the chinch bugs.

Warren: You said they eat the stalks, or...?

Ackerman: Yeah, they'd cut off the stalks and then they wouldn't mature. And used to plow with the tractor. And we had a two-bottom plow, and you had a furrow that was six to eight inches deep, and you'd turn the ground over, and of course you always had to keep the moldboard of the plow in good, shiny condition, oil it so it wouldn't get rusty; otherwise your dirt would stick to it.

Warren: The moldboard is the part that goes through the soil?

Ackerman: Well, the moldboard is the slanted part that would end up turning the soil over. And of course, then when you plow it throws the dirt one direction. So one year you would start at the outside and work towards the inside, and the next year you start with inside and you throw it out so you wouldn't end up with ridges. And when you started in the middle then you'd get to the end and you'd take the plow out of the ground by pulling the lever, and you come around and you come in the other direction. But when you went, when you started... See, I have this right? Anyway, there was a certain time in one direction where you didn't have to take the plow out of the ground, you could just go around the corner, and you could take a spring and tie it on the steering wheel, and with one wheel in the furrow it would guide itself, and it would go around the corners, and I used to plow, and I'd jump off of the tractor, get tired of sitting on the seat there and I'd jump off and follow it for a while and then get back on. Well, my uncle had an International Harvester, so there, it had two wheels—the wheels were close together in the front, but he had another bar and a wheel that was in the furrow, so he could also guide this without being on the tractor. Well, you talk about automation; he developed a system where he had this spring on the tractor, and he would plow at night while he was asleep. And he'd put enough—he'd say, "Well, I want it to run 'til about four o'clock," so he'd put enough gas in it so he'd run out of gas about four o'clock. He'd set his alarm clock and open his window—or his window was probably already open—and listen to see if the tractor's dying or not. Usually right about that time it would die so he'd go back to bed. If it didn't, he'd go out there and see what was going on. So that was automation back in the '30s.

Warren: Some farmers today use satellites to do this.

Ackerman: Satellites, yes, and like I say, my dad was so content or intense on getting straight rows, now with GPS you can get within a few centimeters! But that's pretty expensive equipment!

Warren: Now, we've talked about the layout of the farm. How about the fields and pastures? I think you told me earlier that the farm was 160 acres back then?

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: Were all the plots or the fields and pastures contiguous, or were they scattered around, or...?

Ackerman: Well, of course you have crop rotation. You probably had two or three years of corn, and then you would have wheat or oats—we usually had oats—and with that you'd plant a clover. So you'd have one year of wheat or oats, and then you'd have clover for maybe several years, and that would build the soil back up, and then you'd go back to two or three years of corn. Your fertilizer was from the cow barn. We had our manure spreader, and that's how we had our fertilizer, and you plowed and you didn't have chemicals, and he didn't have big crops, either. I remember my brother—they finally came, then they started coming out with hybrids, and then your production increased. My brother went in the Army, and he said, "Oh, we had 100 bushel to acre of corn," and he was an officer, and one of his men says, "Sir, I don't believe

you." (laughter) And that was the beginning of 100 bushel corn. Now this year was over 200, but there have been some drought years. But the first year that John was farming here, my nephew, there was a bad year, and I went out in the field and I took 100 stocks of corn in a row and picked every ear that was on it and laid them on the back, the trunk of my car and took a picture. There were five little nubbins.

Warren: What year was that?

Ackerman: What year was that, John? About 1983. And then there was hailstorms sometimes. 1936 was a year of temperature records. Well, going back to the crops, we always had alfalfa, and that was for our dairy cattle, and horses—after we had a tractor we had two horses most of the time, and not big draft horses but could pull a hay rack and wagons, and, of course, one was a riding horse that I rode a lot, and when we had the beef herd I would round them up sometimes with riding the horse. The alfalfa would stay there for, oh, maybe five or six years, and that would really replenish your soil.

Warren: So you mowed the alfalfa and baled it?

Ackerman: No, we mowed it and then put it up. You had a hay-loader, which would take, put it up from... You put it in rows, and then you come through with a hay-loader on the hay rack, and then you take it into the barn. You had a fork that you'd put in the hay, and then you have a team of horses to pull the rope that went from one end of the barn to the other, and that was my job when I was very young, like eight, ten years old, driving the horses to pull up the hay, and one man would be out on the hay rack and on or two in the mow, which would put it in the loft, which would take it to the sides then. And out here to the east, just on the other side of the gift shop, that was always a bluegrass pasture for a number of years, and it was close by and it was a good place for ball games. We'd have a lot of ball games out there on weekends, mostly on weekends. And we'd get a number of people, more my brother's age—I played along with him, but usually out in the right field where didn't many balls come. Can we take a break?

Warren: Sure.

(pause in recording)

Ackerman: Okay. I started talking about 1936 was a year of hot and cold temperatures. We had that pasture out here, and we had a big rain and the whole pasture was flooded, and the temperature dropped. I had an ice rink for all winter long! (laughter) And I used to play ice hockey, and that was a year after I was out of high school, so I was at home on the farm, and I'd go out there with my hockey stick and my hockey puck and set up boots or whatever and maneuver around, so I became somewhat adept at stick handling. I played with John and his group, oh, when I was about 75 years old, and I was still outscoring those young guys! (laughter) And then in the summer that year we had record heat. It was in July that we had over 100 for about fifteen days in a row. And this was 1936, and we're just recovering from the Depression. Still things were not that great.

Warren: That was the year of the Dust Bowl out on the plains.

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: Were there other years, '34 or '35, where you recognize or remember—

Ackerman: Well, '36, and what I remember about '36, it was so hot, and corn was usually the best crop. We had a field of clover, alsike clover that we harvested and thrashed for the seed, and there's

something about nature that it doesn't want to be terminated. It wants to reproduce itself, like soft maple trees—when it's hot weather and distressed there'll be a lot more seeds on it, and I think this is what happened that year with this alsike clover. And I remember harvesting it in that 105 degree temperature for about a week, this twenty acres, and you'd mow it, and then you'd take a hay rake and put it in rows, and then we had someone with a thrashing machine from an implement company came out with his thrashing machine to harvest the seed. And that turned out to be the best crop we had that year, and my dad had all kinds of smiles, and he had about six bushels to the acre and it was about $20 a bushel, so there was $120 bushels, and if you got $100 from corn that year it was most unusual. So that turned out, in spite of some of the other crops not being that great, that helped make the year.

Warren: You mentioned some of the problems with insects, the chinch bugs. How about weeds? Did you cultivate after you planted, or how did you deal with weeds?

Ackerman: Well, yes, like I say, with the corn you cultivated three times, you had 'em in rows both directions, and you crossed and then the last one you laid by, and—

Warren: What about drainage problems?

Ackerman: Well, yeah, before we get to that, one year there were grasshoppers, there were so many grasshoppers, and they can devastate crops, too. And I think it was in our clover field that we built kind of a trough on the front end of the car and then put oil in that and drove through the field, and the grasshoppers would jump up or fly up, whatever they do, and then we had a back to this trough, and they'd hit that and then drop into this oil. So we got rid of a lot of the grasshoppers that way.

Warren: Sounds like fun! (laughter)

Ackerman: (laughter) What else were you asking?

Warren: A lot of farms had clove depressions or ponds or marshy areas; did you—

Ackerman: Well, of course this ground was all tiled. This was wetlands, I guess, when they came here, and a lot of four inch tiles, and over towards the west side of the farm (drinks water) the ground water was close to the surface. In the spring of the year, you'd dig a post hole and it'd fill up with water to within about a foot or two of the surface. And we also had, there was a well back there in the middle of the farm at that time, a shallow brick well. It was only about ten, twelve feet deep, but we'd water the cattle there and when I was in high school we bought a windmill and put it up there so we could pump the water for the cattle out there in the middle of the farm. (cough)

Warren: You mentioned periodic drought years. How about other problems with nature, early frosts or late frosts?

Ackerman: Well, not so much because your corn was usually matured and that was the main crop, was corn. Of course, the oats and wheat were harvested earlier in the summer, and the corn was far enough along frost didn't bother it. You'd be, like I say, you'd be shucking corn when snow was on the ground, 'cause it took that long to do it.

Warren: In terms of equipment, you mentioned the tractor, I think you said that came along in about 1930?

Ackerman: Yeah, well, then of course our disc and harrow—you always disced the ground and harrowed it—and then you had a roller, which usually used horses with that to break up the clods more.

Warren: And in terms of crops, you mentioned corn, but did you start raising soybeans at some point?

Ackerman: Well, yes, that was... When I was on the farm, I was only on the farm until I was out of high school, and I started in college in 1939, and so that was my extent of being on the farm, and we didn't have any soybeans back then yet.

Warren: You mentioned wheat, as well.

Ackerman: Yes, we had some wheat, mostly oats, and of course you had the binder where you put them in bundles, and then you'd make the shocks, and we had the thrasher runs, the different ones in the community. We'd get together, and the implement dealer had the separator to—and different ones would... You'd have pitchers and haulers. The pitchers would pitch the bundles up out of the shocks to someone who's on the hay rack, and he'd stack 'em and take 'em into the thrashing machine and unload 'em, and then somebody would take the grain, which was in, put it in a wagon and take that to wherever you stored it, like in our corn crib there were grain bins there and you use the elevators. Sometimes they shoveled it into the grain bins. And you also had a water boy to take water out to 'em, and I was a water boy when I was about twelve years old, and I had a two-wheel buggy where I had my jugs. I'd fill my jugs with water and take 'em out to the people in the field, and then come back and refill 'em and make another round. And then they always had big thrashers lunches, and the men would do the harvesting and the women would get together to prepare the meal for the thrasher, and that was a feast in itself.

Warren: These harvesting teams, it sounds like it was kind of a collaborative effort around the community, from place to place to place to harvest and...?

Ackerman: Yes. The implement dealer had the thrashing machine with a big tractor and a big belt to propel it, and there were, oh, about ten or twelve farms in a thrashing run on down the highway here, and then off on some of the side roads for a ways, and they'd... Well, that probably lasted about a month. They went from one farm to the next, and the wheat was usually a little earlier. You'd do the wheat and then you'd do the oats, and on occasion there would be barley. The wheat had, on the heads there were these spikes [beards], and the barley were worse spikes, and we didn't have barley often but they didn't like that, 'cause when you shocked them those spikes would always be hitting you in the chin. You'd take about, oh, let's see, two, four, six, ten [bundles]—you'd have about three in a row, and then two on each side and one on the top to kind of keep the rain off, and you'd put 'em in shocks, and then you'd let them dry there for several weeks before you put them through the thrashing machine.

Warren: And did you save the stems for straw then?

Ackerman: Yes, we did, and you always had a straw stack which you'd use for bedding for your livestock.

Warren: They go up in the barn, or where was that stored, the straw?

Ackerman: It was outside, just an outside straw stack, and then you'd use it through the winter as you needed it.

Warren: How about marketing, when it was time to sell the corn and wheat and things like that? Did that all take place in Morton?

Ackerman: There were a number of elevators around. There was Cooper Station, which is still in existence, but then there was Crandall, which was over here a couple miles this way, and then there was several around, and I think we usually, I don't know... Usually, well, when we sold the corn—there was another thing: when you sold the corn it'd be in the ear corn, and this man with a sheller would come, the same man that had the thrashing machine, and you'd have a conveyor, and neighbors would come and help get the corn on this conveyor belt, and it would go in the sheller, and you'd have the corn, and then you'd also have a cob pile, and cob pile, sometimes you'd use that for heat in your furnace, or to start your coal. After they built this house they drilled a well, a gas well, and had natural gas, a four-inch pipe on the west side of the house—the pipe's still there—and well's about 130 feet deep, and for several years they had enough natural gas to heat the house, and then it played out, and they always as I was growing up had enough for a hot water heater and stove, gas stove. But then they'd have coal, and during the Depression corn was so cheap that they say it's cheaper to burn corn than buy coal. Well, my dad could never quite come around to much of that; we did some of it, and as he unloaded the corn you'd have a dump in your corn crib where your front wheels would go up so your corn would come out, and my dad would be at the back end there as the corn was coming out and going into the elevator, and he'd pick out the best ears and he'd throw them aside for seed corn, and then somehow the poorer ears he'd throw the other side, and we'd burn that in the furnace for heat. And there was a creek that comes through the corner here and it was across the road, and there were a lot of small willows along that creek, and we got permission from the neighbors to cut down some of those willows. They wanted to get rid of them anyway, and you cut saplings that were, oh, maybe three, four inches in diameter, and you'd trim the branches off and get a stack of that wood here, and then you'd get a saw, special saw that also you got, I don't know the same implement dealer or not, but you put these willow logs in there and push this thing back, and it'd cut through 'em and slide the log over and cut through 'em, and so you had that wood that you'd also use in the furnace to supplement your heating, and so then when I lived here the elm trees were dying and they cut down a big elm tree, and I burned a lot of that when I lived here to heat the house.

Warren: Were there gardens, as well, or orchards?

Ackerman: Oh, yes. We had cherry trees out in front. We always canned cherries. And we had an apple orchard, and we had apples. In the fall you'd load up a box wagon full of apples and take 'em into Birkey's cider press in Morton and have cider, and some of it you'd have for vinegar then later. And on the west side of the house was a garden, and we had a grape arbor out there where we had grapes, and we'd always about every spring we'd plow it with a one horse walking plow to keep the weeds down between the rows. And always canned a lot, canned cherries, and had a whole cupboard full of canned goods. We would can cherries or peaches, and of course then you had your own meat during Depression. You never starved. We never went hungry. You always had enough food that you raised on the farm where some people didn't have that opportunity. But you'd butcher a cow, and we'd have it—and I remember it would be hanging in the machine shed where it was cold. My dad would go out there and get meat different times, and when it got warm what you had left you'd cut off and can, so you had canned beef or pork or whatever.

Warren: Was there a cellar where you stored all this?

Ackerman: Yes, there was a basement, a cellar here, and then our chickens quit laying eggs in the wintertime when it was... So you would gather eggs, and we had a crock, and we stored 'em in

what was kind of a gelatin. We called it liquid glass and they would keep a long time over the winter. And then later we got electricity [and lights] in our chicken house, and then the chickens would lay eggs all winter long.

Warren: So who gathered the eggs every day?

Ackerman: That was my chore when I was younger, to gather the eggs, and I kept track of 'em and how many hundred we sold during that year. I found my record book a while back, how many thousands we sold in the year! (laughter)

Warren: And where was the market for the eggs? Would those go into town?

Ackerman: Yes, we'd take 'em into grocery stores. And then when we... We always had leghorns, which were good layers, but they were smaller chickens and they were not that much meat for eating, but they were good layers, and then we got some roosters and raised 'em for the hatchery. And, of course, then we had a little scale where we weighed them. They didn't want some of the smaller ones they didn't want, but most of them would qualify to sell to the hatchery.

Warren: Well, we're into livestock now. You mentioned dairy cattle that started out kind of small in the early years and then increased the number of head.

Ackerman: First we had just enough for our own use, and then we started selling the milk.

Warren: Right. Did you have beef cattle, as well?

Ackerman: Later we had beef cattle, and my dad would, oftentimes he'd go to Texas and buy calves and have 'em shipped, and they'd unload 'em maybe in Morton or maybe at one of the train stations, and we'd drive 'em along the road to get 'em here and then we'd have 'em in the feed lot to feed 'em out and fatten 'em to try to make a profit.

Warren: About when did that operation start, with the beef cow?

Ackerman: Oh, you mean years?

Warren: Yeah.

Ackerman: Well, I was probably in high school, in the thirties, early thirties. And then later when my brother took over the farm he had his own beef herd, where he raised his own calves.

Warren: That was Clyde?

Ackerman: Clyde, yes.

Warren: How about pigs and sheep, goats? Did you ever get...?

Ackerman: I don't ever remember having goats. We had a few sheep. When I lived here I bought three or four for lawn mowers, but they were pretty selective. They'd leave the weeds! (laughter) And I think my brother on several occasions bought lambs and fed 'em out, but not very often he had some. And let's see, pony, we usually had a pony. Had a riding horse that I rode a lot. I used to like to trap. I started—well, I was probably about ten years old, ten or eleven. I was under twelve, because I caught a skunk, and you had to shoot it, and I wasn't allowed to use the rifle 'til I was twelve years old so I had my brother come and shoot it, and then I went to look at the rest of my traps and had another one, so we had to go the second time! (laughter) He said, "Did you look at the rest of 'em?" So I trapped, and I always—of course, mink was the thing that was worth something, and I always trapped along this creek, and then later I... One year I rode

horseback, and between neighbors here and the next farm I rode back to the end of the farm where it had hedge rows, and there was some fox back there. Then I put a gate in so I could go over to his property. And then later on I had my Model T, and then I walked a lot. I had a pretty good route where I started out down this creek and then I went—

Warren: The creek with the willows that you mentioned?

Ackerman: Down here, yes, but that went up north, and then I went up to the next, went up to the railroad track and another road. Then I followed the railroad track over to another creek, which is out, oh, a mile and a half, and then I followed that creek down to Route 9, which is now 150, and I had about, I don't know, a four or five mile trapping route. I had about 75 traps at that time.

Warren: How often did you make that circuit?

Ackerman: Every day.

Warren: Every day.

Ackerman: Yeah, and I caught mink, muskrat, possum. 'Coon were pretty scarce back then, and now they're all over, and I finally caught 'coons. When I got my Model T, then I expanded my places and drove to 'em and had more 'coons.

Warren: So that was mostly a wintertime occupation?

Ackerman: Oh yes, yes. The season started around the middle of November and ended about the middle of January.

Warren: So you'd bring the animals back here, and you'd process 'em, where, at a barn or...?

Ackerman: I'd skin 'em. I'd skin 'em. I'd skin 'em in the basement, except the skunks! (laughter) And then I'd put 'em on—I made my own stretchers, and I had a number of those stretchers I gave to you for the museum here a couple years ago, and I'd hang 'em up in the attic to dry. I had a wire there so the mice couldn't get to them, and 'cause having corn in the attic, that also attracted mice, and they'd get in the walls of your house and get there every year. And I caught mink, muskrat, and beaver; I caught one beaver. And first fox I had, I had an article about the wily fox that I caught, and it was 1937, and they had my picture in the last issue of DNR's *Outdoors* with a picture of me with a fox over my back and the trap, and a picture of my mother wearing a fox scarf that I had made for her and gave to her for Christmas in 1937, and that was in the last issue of *Outdoors* magazine. And my brother—my dad always used to say when my brother, when Clyde went away to—he was in college—whenever he'd come home for a weekend or whatever, the first thing he'd do is go out and look at the cattle. First thing I would do is get my rifle or shotgun and walk around and do some hunting! (laughter) So he was always more interested in the farm than I was, and so I went into engineering, and my brother made a good career out of farming, and he was very knowledgeable. And he was in the Army during the war in Germany, and after the war they had the GI bill where students could take courses, and he taught agriculture course or short courses to a number of people.

Warren: Where did he do that? Was that at the University of Illinois?

Ackerman: Yes, he got a degree from the University of Illinois, and he was, well, he was on bronze tablet, which is the upper 1% of your class, and was on the livestock judging team and the dairy judging team, and...

Warren: And when you went to college, did you already have an interest in engineering before you started, or was that something you discovered at college?

Ackerman: Well, I was out of high school—my brother was out of high school three years before he went to college, on account of the Depression and all that, and then my sister started, and she offered to stay home if I would go, and I wasn't much interested at the time. I thought, Well, high school is good enough. And then one year, in 1939 I was thinking about it, and in August I decided I wanted to go to college, so in September I was there! It was easy to get in then. And I took civil engineering, and I was—

Warren: Where did you go?

Ackerman: The University of Illinois, of course! (laughter)

Warren: Blue and orange through and through.

Ackerman: Right!

Warren: And so you started college, and you started engineering right away?

Ackerman: Yes, civil engineering, yes.

Warren: And so you went all four years?

Ackerman: Yeah.

Warren: Graduated?

Ackerman: Graduated. I was in Chi Epsilon, which is a civil engineering honorary.

Warren: Great. And did you come back home and consider farming, or did you decide...?

Ackerman: Well, the war broke out and the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed I was in a fraternity, Triangle Fraternity, which is an engineering fraternity, and somebody in the house says, "Let's have a parade," and so it started there at our fraternity house, and somebody had a bugle as his trumpet. It was a bugle, somebody else had a drum, and we left, and somebody got a flag, and we started marching down the street, and we kept picking up more and more people, and we ended up with several thousand, and we went to the home of the president of the University, and we were all kind of bewildered and wondering what was going to happen, and of course he came out and talked to us, said, "Well, keep to your studies for now." And a lot of 'em were ready to do their part, and I said I never saw an outpouring of patriotism as you saw in World War II, and you'll never see it again, and it all started at our fraternity at Second and Daniel. And then ROTC was required, Reserve Officers Training Corps, and you had to take two years, and then you could go into advance. Well, I was too short and I couldn't pass the eye exam, so the companies were hiring people and I went to work for Douglas Aircraft for a year in California, which they say I was doing my part but I didn't quite think I was. So I tried to apply for a commission in the Navy, and again too short and you can't see, (laughter) so I ended up joining the Merchant Marines. So I was in the Merchant Marines 'til the end of the war, and after a certain amount of time—you had to have a certain amount of sea time to become an officer, and they substituted my engineering degree for part of it, so my last trip in the Merchant Marines I was an engineering officer. And when the war ended [in Europe], I was getting ready to go to Japan, but then they dropped the atomic bomb and I didn't have to do that. Then I got a job with the erecting department of American Bridge, which was a subsidiary of US Steel, and it was steel erection, and I worked out of the Chicago office on

steel erection, and worked on a Caterpillar building in East Peoria and walked those four inch beams 100 feet up in the air, and I liked it, but I thought the only future that I had in that was moving around the country for about five or ten years where the jobs were and ending up in Chicago office, and I didn't want that so I left there and took... They were building Marquette Heights, which is a community between Peoria and Pekin, and I got a job there as chief of a surveying party for land surveying, and I worked there for, oh, about a year, and that project ended, and then I worked for the Division of Highways in Peoria, which was my career. I stayed there for—well, I was in Peoria fourteen years, then I was transferred to the central office in planning where I was Assistant Engineer of Planning, and I was there, and I had thirty-one years in before I retired. And then I... Well, I was sixty-two years old and I wasn't ready to quite quit working, so I had different part-time jobs. I changed careers and went into the investment business and worked with an investment company, took a couple NASD exams and worked in that. I don't know, seems like I always had an extra job somewhere. After we were married we were living at my aunt and uncle's farmhouse, and his corn crib needed painting, and he was going to hire someone to paint it. I said, "I'll paint it for you!" So that summer I painted his corn crib! (laughter) All the sides, the cupelo, and all of it. And then he was outside of Morton there on the farm, and he had a barn there, and I made arrangements with my brother. By then, my brother was raising purebred Yorkshire hogs, and he always showed at the Illinois State Fair. He says, "Well, I'll let you use some of my sows, and you raise them." So that was pretty good arrangement, so I started raising hogs for a while while I was working, and that wasn't very profitable and when my wife quit working I couldn't afford it anymore so I quit that! (laughter) When you raise them on the farm you combine it with other things; you get the benefit of the manure, which helps your crops and some other things, but I had to buy all my feed and all that, and I was using my [wife's] last paycheck from teaching school to buy corn. We decided—she only taught one year, and we decided we wanted to raise a family, so she quit teaching and I had to quit raising hogs 'cause I couldn't afford it! (laughter) Then I got my surveyors license, became a registered land surveyor in, oh, I think it was 1954. Then I did a side job of surveys around Peoria and Tazewell County and had some spending money, and at that time the state wasn't under Social Security so I had spending money and I also qualified for Social Security—minimum, but I had my Medicare.

Warren: You eventually moved to Springfield?

Ackerman: Yeah, moved to Springfield in 1963, where the man who was an assistant in planning retired, and they asked me to move down there and take that job, so I did. I thought long and hard about that 'cause Morton was my home all the time, and one time I said I wish they'd just leave me alone, but when opportunity comes you go!

Warren: So we're sitting in the farmhouse, and the farm is still in the family's hands, it's still Ackerman Farms. How did that transition occur? Did your brother take over the farm?

Ackerman: Yes. My brother—after my brother graduated from college, he went to work at a ranch in Texas that had show cattle, and he'd travel around the country to show cattle, and of course there was somebody else that had been there longer than he was, so the other guy always got the better beef cattle to show, but they went to the Illinois State Fair, and my brother knew why this one he was showing wasn't quite as good as the other one, but he also knew how to show it to cover up its faults, and he ended up winning first prize over which one was really better. (laughter)

Warren: (unintelligible)

Ackerman: And then he worked in Bloomington, Producers Credit Association, I believe, which was farm credit, I believe. He worked there for several years, and then after he was out of the Army I believe he went back there for a year or two before he came back to the farm and farmed with my dad. And of course, then that was '46, '47; that was only a couple of years, and my dad passed away rather suddenly. He had a heart attack and died while he was... He hadn't been feeling well for some time, but he died when he was out working, and then my brother took over. My dad was always very conscientious and hardworking, and during the war he was very conscientious and took care of the farm. And of course, he always felt I think guilty that he had to refinance the farm, and I always said I think he was also one of Hitler's victims from the hard work he did, and we had other people around Morton. There's one man in particular that I mentioned that he was in the Army and in training, and then they said he was needed to help on the farm, and so he got out of the Army to help on the farm. Well, being an ex-serviceman, he had priorities for buying equipment. Equipment was hard to get during the war, so he went to this implement dealer with his priorities—Arch Bartlemay here in Morton, about my dad's age or a little older; he's the one that had the equipment, thrashers and all that, and the implement dealer, and this guy went in there with his priorities to buy farm equipment. Well, Arch had told him what he could do with his priorities. He said, "I've got five sons overseas!" (laughter) He told him in plain terms what he could do with those priorities! And then, I don't know, this guy, he was pretty successful here in farming, good years during the war, and he went somewhere else and got his machinery with his priorities. They had a farm group one time, I think it was here, a number of farmers where they had different displays, and this guy was there, and said, "Why don't you tell us how you were successful." Oh, he didn't want to say, and another guy said, "Go ahead, tell 'em Elmer! Tell 'em how you screwed Uncle Sam!" (laughter) I don't know if you want to publish that! You know who that was?

John A: No.

Ackerman: Okay, I'll tell you! (laughter)

Warren: Going back a little bit to catch one of those thoughts—you mentioned that you thought your father was one of Hitler's victims. Is it because all the young men had left the farms, so he had to do it all himself?

Ackerman: Yes, because of the hard work he did during the farm, and he was very conscientious, and of course they had gas rationing, and he was very careful to—you could get gas for the farm, in addition to what you're rationed for your car, and he'd get tanks where he'd keep the gas, and there's no way he would use that for his automobile, but I'm sure a lot of people did, but he wouldn't.

Warren: So in your experience here on the Ackerman Farm as a kid growing up and a young man, did you see any changes during that period of time?

Ackerman: Oh, yes!

Warren: You mentioned the transition from the horse to the tractor.

Ackerman: Oh, yes, we thought there were big changes, 'cause going from horse-drawn and take forever to get things done, and then you had the mechanical equipment and your corn huskers, and then, of course, by having the small acres you didn't have the equipment that some people had where they had all the rows of corn planters and combines and so... And what I've seen now

with GPS and being able to get your straight rows within a few centimeters just by riding! (laughter)

Warren: Does that make you want to get back in the combine?

Ackerman: Not really! (laughter)

Warren: I just wanted to talk a little about farm labor. Did you ever—I think you mentioned you had a hired—

Ackerman: Yes, yes. The farmer, when they had farmer farms you oftentimes had a hired hand that lived with you, and my parents did, and I don't know if they ever had them during when I was living here or not, but during World War I this bedroom up at the top of the stairs were the hired hand's room, and he lived there all the time, Adolph Eiherman, and he was from Germany, and when things weren't going so well for Germany he'd say, "Oh, why don't they do that and why don't they do this?" 'Cause he's obviously still for Germany! And of course, they'd become not quite but approaching like they're almost members of the family. My mother said to him one time, "Adolph, if you don't quit talking that way I'm going to report you!" (laughter) And then we had—there was a family that lived up here at the top of the hill, Harold Herstein. He worked for us quite a lot, but he didn't live here because it was so close. And then Clyde, he helped a lot, and I helped driving the tractor, and then we'd get high school kids to help sometime who were in my brother's class when we had certain things to do, and there was another Herstein, John, and he was out here helping one time. It must have been—well, my brother graduated in 1932, and I think this was either that '32 or '33, and by then he was working at a gas station in Cloverdale, which is between Morton and Peoria, and he was out here one time and helping my dad, and he says, "There's a gas war over at Cloverdale, and gas is ten cents a gallon," and my dad said, "Well, can I get that for my tractors?" He said, "Sure." So we had a hundred-gallon tank, and they weren't these drums like they are now. I think it had a wooden bottom, and they loaded that on the hay rack, and he drove to Cloverdale, which was, oh, four or five miles on the other side of Morton, filled that hundred gallon tank full of gasoline for the tractor at ten cents a gallon. Well, then they moved it off of the hayrack and pushed where they kept it, and it started leaking! (laughter) And so they got flaxseed and they put that in the gas tank, and as the gas seeped out that flax got in those spaces and expanded and stopped the leaking. But they bought gas for ten cents a gallon, and they were selling corn for about ten cents a bushel. Over four dollars the other day!

Warren: Speaking of finances, what were some of the best years and some of the hardest years when you were on the farm?

Ackerman: Well, it varied. Well, usually it was fairly uniform. You'd get 60 bushels to the acre of corn probably most years, except when there was a drought or a problem like chinch bugs, and of course the wheat that year was hurt the worst when the chinch bugs got in. Some of it didn't even harvest; it wouldn't pay to run the harvester through the combine, and so those were the bad years. I think that was, the chinch bugs, I think that was 1932. I'm not even sure of that. But it was usually uniform, and the biggest boost was when hybrid corn was developed, and...

Warren: Thinking back, what were some of the—

Ackerman: I'm sorry. I got to take another break! (laughter)

Warren: Okay, that's fine.

(pause in recording)

Ackerman: Well, my dad always had this place as kind of a show place, and he kept things up well and he always mowed the lawn with a push lawnmower, always kept it looking nice and neat, and at the entrance out here he had a stone post, square stone post about two feet on a side, and with colorful rocks, and he got these rocks from north of Morton where my great-grandfather first settled, and the name of the creek is Ackerman Creek, but some friends of ours owned that property at that time. It's now Morton Park. But he would go there and get these colored stones, and he built these posts at the entrance, a square post on each side of the entrance, quite attractive, and then he had a concrete slab on top, and on top of that two concrete pots where they had flowers. So that was quite an attractive entrance there as we were growing up, and he really kept it up as a showplace.

Warren: Thinking back, what were some of the favorite aspects of farming that you enjoyed?

Ackerman: Well, I kind of enjoyed running the tractor and doing some of those things. What I disliked most and probably one of the reasons I wasn't interested in farming was hauling manure! (laughter) I never liked that job! It was kind of heavy work, to load the manure spreader by hand with a fork, and sometimes when you spread the manure the wind was in the wrong direction, too! (laughter)

Warren: We haven't talked about gender roles to this point. Were there men's jobs and women's jobs or boys' jobs and girls' jobs?

Ackerman: Yes. This is a big house, and it's difficult to maintain, and my mother at times had a hired girl. Some of her neighbors would help for a while with larger families, and paid 'em a nominal amount, but they would help out, and sometimes live here not permanently but maybe stay during the week and help with the housework. The women didn't help much on the farm except our neighbor that lived next door here, and their daughter Anna, she always helped with the farm work. They didn't have any other children, she was the only child, so she was out running the corn planter and doing a lot of those things, not heavy work but did a lot of help with the farm. So the woman's role was mainly in the house and keeping up the house.

Warren: And you'd mentioned neighbors before. In terms of harvesting there was cooperation?

Ackerman: Well, of course, we had the thrashers run, but in harvesting corn my dad's brother that lived over on the next farm over here, we always worked together in hay-making time.

Warren: So there was neighborly cooperation as well as family.

Ackerman: Well, ours was more family there. The thrasher run was neighbors, and sometimes when, well, when the neighbors needed help you'd help each other, just like my brother had a stroke one year when he was—when was that—and I have a video of that, and all the neighbors came in to help harvest the corn, and I have a CD here, a DVD for you that was made by the newspaper and tells about how cooperative the neighbors were in helping, and that's a tradition of farmers. If one has a misfortune, the others are there, ready to help. And I have a thirty minute video I'll give to you, you can use as you see fit.

Warren: And I wanted to ask you about Morton. How often did you go into town? You went to high school there.

Ackerman: I went to high school there, and of course, they had baseball teams—all these communities had baseball teams, and they had band concerts. In the summertime they had band concerts twice a

week, Wednesday night and Saturday night, and we'd oftentimes go to those band concerts. On Wednesday nights you could stay to intermission, then you had to come home. (laughter) I was younger then; it was before I was driving. I didn't drive 'til I was fourteen, a car, and I was fourteen and I went to the neighbors one time to—they had some strawberries for us, and so I went over to the neighbors' to pick up strawberries and parked the car and went in and got the strawberries, and didn't put the brakes on and had the car door open, and it rolled down the hill towards the road and hit their fence and bent the door back. So when my dad got the car repaired, he said, "Well, you'd better wait 'til he's the legal age of fifteen before he drives," so I was shut off for about eight months! (laughter)

Warren: At least you had the strawberries, though! How do you feel about—looking back in your farming days versus the way things are happening today, how do you feel about all those changes in farming and farm life?

Ackerman: Well, nobody wants to go back to the hard work we did in the past, but there are some aspects of it that you can't replace that were good elements. The family farm that kept you together, you don't have that anymore. Young people starting out in farming, they can't do it unless they inherit it! You can't afford it! You can't afford the ground, you can't afford the machinery. You used to make do with what you had; if it didn't work, you fixed it. You didn't throw it away and get a new one, you fixed it. I didn't like hauling manure, but that was probably the best thing you could do is your fertilizer, and now you have artificial fertilizers and artificial insecticides. And at the time I thought, well, how would the United States feed the world if they didn't have these insecticides? But now they're still in the soil. John grew pumpkins for the canning factory here in Morton, and they tested the soil out here in my forty acres one time some years back, and they said, "No, there's still enough residue there you can't grow those for public consumption." So environmentally, I think we're going a step backwards. Production-wise, we can feed the world, grow bigger crops, we use crops for more things and satisfies other things, but you've gained in one side and you've lost on the other.

Warren: You mentioned the family farm; it seems like there are fewer and fewer family farms. As the number of farms drops and the size of the farms increase, how do you feel about that?

Ackerman: Well, I know we can't go back to the 160-acre family farm; it just isn't going to be that way. But if I had a choice, that's the way I'd want it. There's a Caterpillar tractor company; they have a parts plant in Morton. They have a big plant up in Mossville, and when I was working for the Division of Highways we were developing the interstate system, and the interstate was coming through Morton, and there were some people there that they wanted to buy some property. Caterpillar wanted to build in Morton instead of the plant they have in Mossville, and some real estate people came to Morton and said, "We're not leaving until we have this ground." They talked to this man, and he was—I don't know—let's see, he was about my brother's age. This was in the mid-fifties, so he was forty years, forty, forty-five years old. He could have retired. They offered him enough money he could have retired. They kept bothering him. He finally said to them, "I want to live here, I want to farm here, I want to die here. Leave me alone." So the plant wasn't built in Morton. I've always admired him.

Warren: That's a great story. Well, you're familiar with what's happening in farming these days, the GPS systems and the genetic manipulation of corn and soybeans and things like that. What changes do you expect to see in farming, say, in the next ten to twenty years?

Ackerman: I expect to see crops that are developed that don't need insecticide, don't need fertilizer. They'll produce it within itself. I expect to see equipment like my uncle had forty [seventy] years ago, runs by itself! (laughter) And it's going to take a long time to restore the ground where it's been abused, and they're making strides now to revert back to some of the wetlands. There may be more of that as you get crops that produce more. Maybe you can revert back to some of the grasslands, wetlands, and still have production to feed people and use for industry. Hopefully the farm will take the place of the oil and be helpful to the environment and helpful for the United States and helpful for the farmer. The problem is the almighty dollar. I talked about the University of Illinois, and I'm upset with some of the things that they're doing now. They hire a president, and the main reason they hire him 'cause he's a fundraiser. That shouldn't be what is part of education. People have given farms to the University of Illinois. They have had tenant farmers there for years and generations; the same family may be on the farm sixty or seventy years. What are they doing now? Cash rent to the highest bidder. Sorry, you're gone. And maybe have more money for a few years, but in the long run they're going to suffer, and I hope they reconsider and have the foresight to see how they're going to suffer. What's going to be ten, twenty years from now? Whoever predicted the things we have now? Who is the guy in the comics of the 25th century? What's that comic?

Warren: Buck Rogers?

Ackerman: Buck Rogers and the 25th Century? We got those things now, beyond what he was talking about! Wrist radios, we're long past that! So what's going to happen in the next twenty years, the way technology's developing? It'll boggle your mind! (laughter)

Warren: Well, are there any things that you'd like to talk about that you haven't mentioned yet?

Ackerman: I'm sure I'll think of things during the night tonight! (laughter) Well, I guess a thing that maybe I've glossed over is in addition to the family farm the strength of the family itself. My dad and my mother were so engrossed in us and would do anything for us, so we would have a better quality of life. (crying) You don't appreciate it at the time. When you do, it's too late. Sorry! (laughter)

Warren: There's obviously a lot of love on this farm.

Ackerman: Yes.

Warren: Are we done?

Female: I think there's one... (crying) I won't be able to listen to it, but I think you need to ask my dad what it means for John to be running this farm.

Ackerman: Pardon? Oh, what John has done here.

Warren: We've talked about the family farm and the fact that the farm is still—

Ackerman: I don't know if I want this for publication or not, but I'm going to say it now and I might want permission for you to publish it. (laughter) My brother was a great farmer. He knew everything about agriculture, but he said, "If I won't mow those weeds in the farmyard here, my crops aren't going to be any better!" [redacted information here]

We didn't know what was going to happen to this farmhouse when John moved in. Are they going to tear it down? But John went in here and redid the whole house, tore the plaster and lath out of the kitchen walls and redid it, and the whole family was so pleased with what he did

to restore it, keep the family farm. What's going to happen in the future? Development is coming this way. They sold acreage here on the other side of Tennessee Road I understand for $20,000 an acre. I think this farm was appraised at $150 an acre when my dad passed away. Can you afford to continue that? I don't know. I hope so. I appreciate what they've done so far. Will they be able to continue it? Who knows—that's anybody's guess, and I wouldn't resent whatever they did, 'cause they did so much already. (crying) I get emotional over these things! (laughter)

Warren: That's great. Should we call it quits?

Ackerman: Okay.

Warren: Okay, wonderful. Thanks for making my job so easy!