



the

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Illinois Agriculture “From A to Z” Online

Want to learn about raising bison in Illinois or how dairy farmers operated in the early 1900s? (They got up at 4 a.m. to find the cows in the pasture.) Perhaps you’re curious about the Amish religion and how it relates to their farming methods, or you want to know if anybody raises bees in Illinois and how they do it (carefully). Now, there’s a web site where you can learn that and much more.

Last November, the Illinois State Museum in Springfield launched a web site called the “Audio-Video Barn” (<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us>) which offers audio and video interviews with 139 people currently or formerly involved in most aspects of Illinois agriculture, as well as photos of the industry dating back to the 1890s.

Bob Warren, who oversaw the project for the Museum, says the impetus for it was the Museum’s desire to “move in a new direction. Someday...we want to expand the Illinois State Museum...One thing we’d like to do is feature Illinois agriculture in exhibits.”

The desire to look more at the state’s agriculture stems from the Museum’s interest in the interactions between humans and their natural environments, he adds. Agriculture is an important part of Illinois’ past and present. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Illinois grows more pumpkins and horseradish than any other state and is the second biggest producer of soybeans and corn. “We’re in competition with Iowa for those two crops,” Warren says.

“The Museum thought the best way to start expanding into agriculture would be to gather infor-

mation. One way to do that is through oral history interviews, that’s the route we chose,” Warren says. “It turned into a big project.”

To help the Museum tackle the project it worked with Northern Illinois University and the University of Illinois at Springfield, both of which had already recorded 60 oral histories of agriculture professionals. The Museum worked with Abraham Lincoln

Presidential Library and Museum staff to record 79 more. The project was funded with money from the Museum’s 1877 Fund and a two-year, \$564,651 National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, “an executive branch funding agency through the White House,” Warren says.

“We wanted to interview people around the state, have gender balance and ethnic diversity, and we wanted to cover

as many different aspects of Illinois agriculture as we could,” he adds. The people interviewed range in age from 12 to 96 and include veterinarians, winery owners, migrant orchard workers, broadcasters, a former U.S. secretary of Agriculture, an elk rancher, and an herb farmer, to name a few.

“There’s a tremendous amount of history (in the Audio-Video Barn web site) and a lot of family history,” says Tom Jennings, Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDA). “It gives you a great perspective on the promise agriculture has and the impact it has on our daily economy here.”

Charlyn Fargo, Bureau Chief of County Fairs and Horse Racing for IDA, helped Warren determine



This Backhus 16.43 compost mixer is used to make Organimix brand of compost on Golden Oaks Farm in Wauconda. The machine straddles the rows of compost and turns and mixes it as it travels down the rows. Courtesy Illinois State Museum, photographer Robert Warren.

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whom to interview for the site. She says the web site is for everybody. "It's such a great educational tool. Pick a topic about ag and it's got somebody who can talk about that, passionately... Just about anything you want to learn about ag from A to Z is there."

Warren says the web site had about 180,000 hits at last count. "We're also hoping it will be used by classrooms and school groups," he adds, as the site contains instructions for conducting oral histories and lesson plans adjusted to the national learning standards.

Users can search the site by county, topic, name of the person interviewed, or dates discussed during

the more than 300 hours of interviews (those dates go back to the 1700s). The web site's material is organized into five categories: land, plants, animals, people, and technology to make searches simpler.

Warren has applied for another grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services that would enable the Museum to help small, regional museums around Illinois put their collections online and train their staff to conduct local oral history interviews. The interviews would be added to the Audio-Video Barn and would help the Museum develop a web module about the history of Illinois agriculture extending from prehistoric times (3000 B.C.) to today.



<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us>



This was a steam tractor powering thresher on Stark Farm in DeKalb County. Power was transferred from the steam tractor to the thresher by a large belt, not visible in the photo. The thresher is operating in the background. Courtesy Illinois State Museum, photographer Robert Warren.

What They Say...

Here are some snippets from the oral histories on the Audio-Video Barn web site.



The Timber Valley Fresh Scent Farm in Petersburg raises white-tailed deer to collect their urine and make fresh deer scent for hunters to use to attract male deer. The owner, Cavan Sullivan, started this enterprise to earn money for college tuition. Courtesy Illinois State Museum, photographer Doug Carr.



Cullen and Leroy Sweet cultivated between rows of vegetables with a hand-guided, horse-powered implement in 1895. The Sweet Farm is located near Franklin in west-central Illinois. Courtesy Illinois State Museum, photographer Leroy Sweet.

“We never had grasshoppers bad enough here to destroy crops, but we did have it bad enough that we harvested and killed them. We had what we called a ‘grasshopper catcher’ that was a big box...you drug (it) in the clover; they’d be in the clover fields and the grasshopper would jump and... immediately fell in the (catcher)... When we got that full we sacked them up and set them on a fencepost and left them for a couple months and fed them to the hogs.”

-Bert Aikman, Montgomery County, interviewed in the 1970s when he was in his 90s

“April 11, 1948. That’s the day that the Rural Electric Co-op came to our farm and hooked us up to electricity...They were ready to hook us up just before World War II broke out and when the war broke out, copper was taken for the war effort and so there was no wire available...(Getting electricity) literally changed our life, literally. My mother threw away these heavy, flat irons that she’d used to iron. We got a refrigerator; (we) no longer had to put perishables in the basket at the end of the rope in the cistern...We no longer had to milk cows by hand, we got a milking machine. We no longer had to put cans of milk into cold water to keep fresh, we now had a milk cooler. It just changed everything for us.”

-Orion Samuelson, Host of National Farm Report, Cook County, interviewed in the 2000s when he was in his 70s

“You don’t just open a winery. There’s a lot of planning. There’s a lot of lab equipment and chemicals, and cleaning equipment and scheduling, labels you have to buy and bottles and capsules.”

-Edward Russell, Bella Terra Winery, Johnson County, interviewed in the 2000s when he was in his 60s

What They Say...

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“My parents’ farm was very labor-intensive. The farm that we are on right now is not labor-intensive... We’re more capital-intensive than my parents’, less labor intense. We do have quite a bit more knowledge about the nutrition of livestock than we did back then...I’d say there’s quite a bit of difference.”

-Ruth Hambleton, University of Illinois Extension educator, Jefferson County, interviewed in 2008 when she was in her 50s



These tilters on the Sweet Farm near Franklin dug trenches that slanted downward and away from the field. In the trenches they laid cylindrical, clay drainage tiles. Rainwater drained through the soil, into the tiles, and was carried away from the field. Tilters usually used a grid system to organize the drainage across a field. Courtesy Illinois State Museum, photographer Leroy Sweet.

Transitions

On April 16, **Governor Pat Quinn** appointed Representative **Julie Hamos** (D-18, Evanston) as the Director of the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services. She replaces **Barry Marram** who retired. **Robyn Gabel** was named to replace Hamos in the Illinois House of Representatives.

James Brosnahan, a Democrat from Oak Lawn, resigned his seat in the Illinois House in February. Democratic committeemen from the 36th District selected **Michael J. Carberry** to replace him and Carberry took the seat in March. Brosnahan is now the chief legal counsel for the city of Blue Island.

Former State Representative **Deborah L. Graham**, a Democrat who represented the 78th District, resigned from the Illinois General Assembly after she was chosen to represent the 29th Ward on the Chicago City Council.

In Memoriam

Dick Klemm, a former Assistant Republican Leader of the Illinois Senate, died March 22 at the age of 73. He served as a state representative for 12 years and as an Illinois senator for ten years. He died at home from a stroke.



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