



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Bernadette Mayo

Interview Date: March 30, 2009
Interviewer: Vera Oye' Yaa-Anna
Transcriber: James McMahon

This interview transcript is the property of the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project.
Not to be reproduced without permission.

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Today we are speaking with Bernadette Mayo from the Eastern Market and this date is Monday, March 30th, 2009. Welcome Bernadette.

MAYO: Hello

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Now can you please tell me how you first got to the market?

MAYO: I got to the Market because my son gave me a call one day. We had been selling my products at different venues ... festivals and I used to do it by myself and my friend at the Bug ... and he got into selling my products ... homemade soaps and salts and body [burns] and lotions and potions ... He happen to be working in DC and somebody told him about these ... the market on the weekend. He went down to investigate. He gave me a call and said "Ma, you got to come down here. You know this is a nice place." So I went to the Market and ... we found out that you had to be there very, very early to get a space. So what we decided doing was, I would go early in the morning, like five o'clock. My son is not an early person, he lives further away. He lives in Baltimore, I live in Columbia, Maryland. So I would get there at five to set out my chair to get a space. Then he would come around nine when the market started. So we kind of did it in shifts. Some days I would have my grandchildren with me. So I would get them up in the morning, just thrown them in the car with their pajamas on, hair not combed, get in the car and have their breakfast in the car, and come down to the market to get a space and put a chair out. Then we would sit in the car until they started giving out spaces around 8:30 or 9 o'clock.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So which year was this?

MAYO: This was in 1996, Eastern Market was a very prosperous time ... The Market was at a beautiful time of the year; I came in the Fall. The atmosphere, the horn playing in the background, many, many people shopping. It was just an interesting and wonderful experience.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: And so this Market is really being good to you and your family. Do you have any pictures of the market ?

MAYO: I may have a couple of pictures. I took pictures but I ... I would have to look for them. I don't know I have them, but I first ... what I should have said in the beginning. I want to give homage to John [Harrod] who ho ... my experience as a vendor. And also Tom [Rall], he was running the market on Sunday and John was running it on Saturday, I believe. And no matter what space I got I had to take it. And I made do with what I had. And that gave me a wealth of experience, in how to set up my tables

every time, every weekend I would set up differently because the space may be different. And eventually I got a permanent space on both days. But it was an experience.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So how has your business changed over the years?

MAYO: The business has grown tremendously. I started out just making a couple bars of soap and now I think I make about seventeen different soaps, and many different scents of butters. Some people come and give their own specialized order. I would do it for them. It's the people, my customers that grew my business. I had no intentions of getting this big. And if wasn't for the people, the customers and my son, who helped me, I don't think the business would have grown this fast.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: But what have you done really ... you haven't really done much to attract customers. They just know about it?

MAYO: Mostly it's word of mouth didn't do a whole lot of advertising. I always ... my motto is my products will sell themselves. And they do sell themselves. Word of mouth has been my most experienced way of advertising. And in the market people come there from all over the country, actually all over the world. My most ... the biggest experience I've had was when this couple was getting married and they wanted olive oil soaps as their favors. And they were getting married in Greece. By me being there at the market gave me that opportunity to make these soaps for the couple and I shipped them to Greece. I am very, very ... I tell that story all the time, that I ship anywhere in the world. I did ship these soaps to Greece. They had them in their favorites, the colors of Greece which is blue and white. So I wrapped all the soaps in blue and white. And the shipping itself was more than what the soaps cost, but the bride was very happy with them. She had no problem with, you know, the cost of the shipping. And that gave me a great experience. I mean I've had many experiences at the market. Like I have found people all over the world. And they go back home and they will call me, to have me ship products there. So, in many ways my business has grown. And the last three years I've started putting my products on the internet where they can order online. So that's really, really been taking off, and that because I met so many people at the market from everywhere, all walks of life.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Now what are the holidays, what are the holidays like for you?

MAYO: Oh, the biggest holidays are Christmas and Mothers' Day, of course. They are the biggest, there's no planning for what ... how much you are going to sell at Christmas time and every year ... year after year it has gotten bigger and bigger. Mothers' Day is another holiday that's very, very popular. People come there to buy products for their mom, their wife, their sisters and even during the summer, on holidays when their families come in town they'll bring their families past the booth and say this is where

I get your soap from that I sent you. You know, so I meet many families of my customers. This is a place where they bring their out of town guests, or out of town, people from out of town to visit, one of the sites that they visit, when they come to Washington, DC.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: How did you find out about the fire?

MAYO: Ah! The fire ... the fire, really, really changed everything. I think that was the downfall. Come down from the market. I mean I see it coming back up again, but that was a very, very sad day. Another vendor, another soap vendor called me about five or six o'clock in the morning and told me to turn on the television. And when I did I was devastated because I think it happened on a Monday and I was just there, you know, just there. It was on a Sunday. It was unbelievable. I thought I was dreaming. And I stayed glued to the television and called everybody, anybody I could to find out about the fire.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So your business has been down from what ... because of the fire?

MAYO: Yeah, it took a long time. I set up at different venues, other than Eastern Market. My family sets up and helps me out and I also go to different venues, and people did not know the market continued to stay open. And for years people still believe that the market was closed because of the fire. But I can say that the market opened the very next weekend after the fire. We made do, we bounced back. We did the best we could. Business was not the same, but we continued on. And eventually, slowly, slowly, it came back. But not at the level it was before the fire.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So what do you think will happen in second life of the market?

MAYO: That's not a ... it's a hard question to answer because I can't tell the future. But I do know that we are a resilient people. And the vendors are a different kind of people. Cause you have to be, to be out there all year round. They are resilient. We will be there forever, I guess. We will be there. Things are going to change. And will lose a lot of what we had. But hopefully we will make the future something that is more viable. And to the point that it was before. I am sure we are going to lose a lot that we had. That flavor, that culture that we had back then. But hopefully we can continue on. There are many vendors that are no longer there. Some are no longer with us. Some have passed on. And some have just not come back. There are a lot of changes going on. I think we are going to lose a lot of what we had. The flavor of what we had. But hopefully we can bring something new to the market.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Do you plan to do something different or are just going to continue with you same products? Will you add products or you just continue to improve on what you have?

MAYO: Ah, probably continue to improve on what I have. I am constantly changing. I changed the setup of my booth. The whole structure of my booth may change ... the tablecloth may change, the containers I use ... I am always changing, always. I probably will continue to change till I decide not to sell again. I mean change is always good, but the basis of my product will never change. That will stay the same.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Are you concerned about the increase in rent?

MAYO: The increase in rent. I mean you expect these things. I don't like it of course, especially in a down time ... economic time and the state that the market is in. I think the increase of rent could have happened at a different time.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: How about the management?

MAYO: Management. Right now I don't even feel like we're in a management. Right now we're just kind of like in maybe a transition that's continuing. It's not being managed the way I think it should be, at this time, no.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Had there been a lot of turf competition?

MAYO: I think they tried to make everybody comfortable. The older people who have been there for a while ... of course is not going to let them get away with too much anyway. I just don't feel like it's being managed. So-called managed. The only good thing I can say is the communication part of it. But a lot of people ... you know, when we first started out Saturdays was a craft day. That was a day where people made their product. Sunday was the flea market day. Now it's all mixed up. New people that I don't even know are in permanent spaces that I don't know who they are. But they got in. I guess it was a good time to get in. when somebody ... when people don't who are managing, so-called managing don't know who's who, or how long people have been there. They can only go by word of mouth. So, it kind of like in a chaos. But I try to stay at a level where I can still do what I am there to do, and be a vendor and sell my product. And give my customers what they are used to. I can't even get into the politics of it all. It always been political at Eastern Market and ... I just have not been involved in that part of it.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: How did you feel about closing of Seventh Street on Saturdays? Remember they used to be open and now it's closed, so how do you feel about that?

MAYO: Saturdays and Sundays. I felt that it was a great idea. The customers loved it. Because you have people coming there who are ... you know, just strollers and the children and they have room to walk in the street and they love it. Customers commented on it and said they wished that it would stay closed on

the weekend. So I like it. I thought it was a good idea to have the street closed, for safety reasons as well as for visibility.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So what do you think have been the major problems with the fire, with the renovation? I mean what do you see? It's a major problem that ... ?

MAYO: Well my thought after the fire was that the farmers got ... recognized and we as vendors weren't recognized as being ... as this was our livelihood as much as it was their livelihood. We suffered as much as they suffered. We did lose out ... business the way they did. And they got a new structure. You know they got monies to help carry on. We had to pick up the pieces and make do and, you know continue on. Some people had to get part-time jobs, because this was their livelihood. You know, just like it was the farmers. I always felt like the vendors were treated like stepchildren. I think that we bring to the market just as much as what they bring. Actually, I think myself bring even more. Like I said, I travel all over selling my products, Eastern Market is my base. So people say, you know, where are you located? I say I am located at Eastern Market every weekend. So, when people come in town, I mean we travel as far as Chicago. And when people come in town, then come to see us. So they come to the Eastern Market to buy my products. The same way with other people, you know. We advertise for the Eastern Market. We bring the people there. We made it international I think. People who come there on planes, you know they travel far away. They are not coming there to buy meats or the cheeses, to carry back on the plane. They come there to shop with us the vendors. And we don't get any [recognition] recognition for that. At all.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: And that is painful?

MAYO: That is painful. I mean we are treated like stepchildren. And I don't think ... we any less than what they are. We bring as much to the Market as they do.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: What do you think of the renovation? Is there something major that you think that the renovation will bring to the Market? Something that, perhaps, was not in the last structure you think? Something that would ... help you all?

MAYO: Well, I think the first thing is the bathroom. The first thing when you had to use that is a bathroom. You know all of the establishments that have bathrooms. But to have our own bathroom will be nice. I think the farmers' part of the market did have a bathroom but it wasn't conducive to those who are handicapped or who are small children. You know, you had to go up in the back and go up these little steps and it was so small you had to sit sideways to even use the toilet. So I think the first thing that comes into my mind is a bathroom. Maybe some heat on the inside. Although I am an outside vendor, I

know those are the main things that hopefully the new renovation will bring. Also a nice atmosphere, a nice level street, maybe. With the [grey] pavers. Aesthetically, it's going to look nice.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: If you had a wish list, what would your wish list for the market consist of?

[ed: there seems to be a gap in the tape here, because this question is not answered.]

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Well are you a native Washingtonian?

MAYO: No, I am not. I am not a native Washingtonian. I am ... I live in Columbia, Maryland.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So how many miles do you have to travel to get to the market?

MAYO: It's about 20 miles ... 20, 25 miles to get there. It takes about 35 minutes to get there.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Do you have to wake up real early?

MAYO: I do. I have to wake up early. But there are people who come as far as Pennsylvania. Some people come from New York. People come from all over. They come to sell their wares at Eastern Market. And I think this is great opportunity. I don't think there is another market. Well maybe there is. I don't know of another market for the east coast that has the draw as much as the Eastern Market does. For vendors as well as for consumers. It's just a very well known market. It gives you an opportunity to grow your business and I really, really, appreciate it. I am at the point now that I am ... have to think about how long I'm going to be doing this, all year long, in the cold, especially after this past winter. It was a cold winter. But I've gotten to a point where, if I had to I could sell from the internet. Because I have accumulated so many customers from being at the Eastern Market so many years. My business has grown there.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So the market has really been good to you!

MAYO: It has been good to me. There is nothing else like it.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So what did you think at the response of government and the community, when you had the crises with the fire?

MAYO: The community was very outspoken—outgoing. They were very sympathetic. The government ... we got no new communication from the government, as far as the vendors were concerned. That I know of. I did not get any communication from the government. I mean they came down, but it was more of the farmers ... got all the attention.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: How do the vendors stay glued to the grapevine? Do they have an organization ... that something like a union or something? Do they come together at any time?

MAYO: No, no. When I first came there ... I might have been to a couple of the meetings. Early on. I don't even know whether there was an organization or they called us in to have a meeting. We, this year, the first year that I know that I've gotten word that they do have these meetings that we are welcome to come as we want to. But most of the things discussed are not really pertaining to the vendors per se. We do not have a big voice. Not at all.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So that the meeting is basically is a management kind of meeting.

MAYO: Or a community meeting. It's more like a community thing. Community ... management. I went to a couple of meeting where Diane Freeman had "Friends of Market Gallery Five" or "Market Five Gallery" I think it's called, that I have been to some of those meetings. But we don't have anything now. Yeah, meetings in organization and ... that was the welcome. They just have a lot to say.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So the major problems you think are once the renovation is over going to be the structural problems will be done with and think you have a more of a unifying group?

MAYO: Not unless somebody takes the initiative to start a group. No, I don't think it will be more unified group. Vendors always took second and the ... problems with the farmers ... there's some initiative to solve those problems. The vendors ... I really don't feel like ... we just speak our mind. And, you know, we just don't let people run over the top of us, but yeah, something more could be done for the vendors. And as far as someone listening to us.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Would you ... how would you describe Eastern Market to an out-of-towner? I now have heard it described as diverse community. How would you ... what is your take on it, I mean, how would you describe to someone who didn't have any idea what it was all about.

MAYO: Well, I usually tell people it's an open air market and sell handmade crafts, imported items, vegetables, fruits, handmade baked goods, a variety of things that you can purchase ... most of it is outside and some of it's inside. And it's a lively place in the spring, especially the spring and the fall.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So that's the best time, the spring?

MAYO: Yeah, I love it in the spring. It's beautiful. And the fall.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: But even in the winter, people are out there?

MAYO: Oh yeah, people still come in the winter. It's just that the atmosphere changes when the weather is nice, of course. Everybody comes out, the dogs, the baby carriages, the strollers. It's just so much livelier time. Although, the winter time is really nice. It's Christmas trees and the smells and the sounds are ... you know, it's a beautiful place to be.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Wow, it sounds like it, it sounds like you've really had a good time and your children really like the market?

MAYO: Yes, yes.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So they have grown up in the market?

MAYO: Well they were grown when they started but there were other vendors who had children who I've watched grow and become teenagers and, you know, grown adults, and go to college, and you see people ... vendors that you get attached to and some you don't see any more. Like the book man was there when I came ...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

OYE' YAA-ANNA: The holidays must really be the best time of the year for you?

MAYO: Yes, the holiday ... the Christmas holiday and Mothers' Day is our biggest holiday. Christmas time I ... you know, I would like to see more effective ... things going on, like Christmas lights and maybe music. Wintertime, it would be nice to have the outside heater for the vendors as well as for the customers. That would be a nice thing to have ... more outgoing, more reaching out, being a vital market at Christmas time. It would be a nice gesture.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: So on the whole you say that you had a wonderful opportunity and the market has been kind to you. And is there any word you would like to leave with us? Something that you would like to share with ... ?

MAYO: I would like to say that I want to end the same way I began. To give homage to those who came before me. I, like I said, I just came in 1996. The Market started well before I did and made it what it is, made it what it was at the time that I came, which was a vital prosperous market. It has been through many changes. It had its many ups and downs, but throughout it all I have learned a lot. I have met many. I enjoy going. It takes a certain kind of person that comes out there every weekend, every week throughout the year to sell the products, but it's the people ... the people keep me going.

OYE' YAA-ANNA: Bernadette, I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule. I know you're busy to come and do this for us. I look forward having you at the market for many, many, many days.

MAYO: Thank you. Bye, bye.

END OF INTERVIEW