Interview with Dan Donahue

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Interviewer:         Sharon House
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Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project
Dan Donahue Interview, June 8, 2009

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

HOUSE: So we’re here today to do an interview with Dan Donahue. This is part of the Eastern Market project. This is the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol History Project. My name is Sharon House. It’s June 8, 2009, and we’re at 536 Sixth Street SE, Washington, DC. Dan, thank you very much for doing this. Did I pronounce your name right?

DONAHUE: Yes you did. My mother would be proud of you.

HOUSE: Okay. Is that your full name? Is that what I should go by?

DONAHUE: Daniel Stephen Thomas Donahue.

HOUSE: All right. Would you tell us when and where you were born?

DONAHUE: Methuen, Massachusetts.

HOUSE: Where’s that?

DONAHUE: It’s about 30 miles north of Boston on the New Hampshire border.

HOUSE: Okay and would you tell us when?

DONAHUE: In the last century—1947.

HOUSE: Can you tell us when and why you came to the Washington area?

DONAHUE: I was stationed here in the Navy, at the Navy hospital in Bethesda—back in the 60’s. And for a few years, and then when I returned from overseas I decided to come back to Washington because it was a little, quiet, sleepy town.

HOUSE: And you lived on Capitol Hill at that time?

DONAHUE: I moved to Capitol Hill I believe in 1969 on 13th Street right above Lincoln Park in a place we fondly called the Transylvania Hotel.

HOUSE: It wasn’t a hotel though—a house …

DONAHUE: No it wasn’t. It belonged to a senator from Illinois—Stevenson, his legislative assistant. And he leased it out to us. And it was a three-story house, and it was paneled. It was nice. And there was four of us living there. And it worked out rather nicely. But it was dark and spooky most of the time.

HOUSE: And you lived there for several years?
DONAHUE: Yes.

HOUSE: And what were you doing during that time?

DONAHUE: That particular time I was working for a law firm doing patent research downtown.

HOUSE: So you lived there, I think you told me before, from ’69 until ’89 or something?

DONAHUE: No, no, ’70.

HOUSE: Until ’70.

DONAHUE: About a year. And then we moved. The reason we had to leave is because the fellow who had the house got a job in Congress. I don’t know if he came in as a representative or another administrative position. But we wanted to leave anyway.

HOUSE: So, you left the Hill then?

DONAHUE: No I didn’t. I moved to 1200 East Capitol Street.

HOUSE: Okay, then you lived around Lincoln Park at that time.

DONAHUE: Yes I did.

HOUSE: And you lived there for—

DONAHUE: Well, actually there was a place in—a spot in between. I did there, yes, for a year. And then I wanted to live by myself. So I found a nice little place on Sixth Street [NE] right behind Marie Hertzberg’s house where all the roses are on Sixth and East Capitol. And it had a big huge garden in the back where I grew my vegetables and lived there while I still working downtown.

HOUSE: And when did you leave the Hill as a resident?

DONAHUE: Uh, ’84.

HOUSE: So how did you get involved in the Market business?

DONAHUE: Well, through the garden club initially.

HOUSE: The Capitol Hill Garden Club?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm.

HOUSE: Oh that’s interesting.
DONAHUE: Yes. Let’s see, there’s Will Hill, Jim Anton and Johnnie Leitch. Three out of four of us were officers in the Club [Capitol Hill Garden Club] at one time or another. And this was while I was still working downtown. And we were selling tulip bulbs for the Garden Club. And we would get there at six o’clock in the morning. And there was only four of us who were crazy enough to get up at that particular time of the day and go down there and sell tulip bulbs at the Market. We did that until about ten o’clock in the morning when normal people would get up and come to the Market. And we had a wonderful time. We did this year after year after year and I just absolutely loved it. And then it evolved—that particular part of it—evolved to where it was self-sufficient and they had more volunteers to come and do things. And finally they actually took over, the volunteers, setting up and breaking down the displays. That’s how I got hooked on the Market—which was, I think that was back in the 70’s.

HOUSE: And then eventually you ended up growing things in Southwest [DC].

DONAHUE: Oh, well yeah. How that worked out was I got real heavy into landscape maintenance and contract negotiations and overseeing certain things. I was like a trouble shooter. I’d go into a project for two or three years. Straighten it up, build it up for them, put the grounds in order, and then turn it over to—turnkey operation which would turn over into—they could maintain it in-house.

HOUSE: And what’s a turnkey?

DONAHUE: Turnkey is when you build a business so it’s self-sufficient; it runs by itself and you have all the documentation and the blueprint to operate the business.

HOUSE: And so this was a program that was being sponsored by someone?

DONAHUE: Oh no, no, no. It was my job, I did that. Prior to that I taught horticulture in Baltimore and after that a mentoring program, a CETA project with Melwood Horticultural Training Center. We worked with the disadvantaged.

HOUSE: Okay you said a CETA project?

DONAHUE: Both of those were, yes—Comprehensive Employment Training Act, Department of Labor. So we got grants and we went to work.

HOUSE: And did you study horticulture in school or is it just strictly from what you were doing here on the …
DONAHUE: It started when I lived in Texas as a young boy. I got lost in the corn field. [laughs] And worked my way through there and my mom decided I should have my own garden as opposed to walking around in some farmer’s field. It worked out very well [laughs].

HOUSE: Okay, so then you were in Southwest [DC].

DONAHUE: Well I managed the grounds of Catholic University and after that an international construction company grabbed me and gave the responsibility for the East Coast. And they went out of business because the boss ran away with the secretary and took all the money. So we ran the company for about seven months after that, and then when we ran out of money and projects, we disbanded and I needed something to do and I was driving it—went to the Post Office one day in Southwest and looked up and inquired about the building and I found out that I could lease the top floor which is a drive-up parking structure. And put four greenhouses on top of there and started selling plants at the Eastern Market.

HOUSE: And that was across the street from the Southwest Post Office?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HOUSE: Directly across the street?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HOUSE: So you’re one of the more recent, perhaps one of the last farmers to actually raise things in the city that sold at Eastern Market you think?

DONAHUE: Yeah, I guess. Recently I read an article about folks in the Southwest area [of DC] where they were growing vegetables in tubs on roofs. It was a pictorial article in the Post or the Washington Post magazine, a few years back.

HOUSE: I see. But anyway, so you raised vegetables there?

DONAHUE: No I raised herbs, and flowers, and imported bulbs from Holland. I planted those up in the pots and sold them as decorative flowers and ground covers.

HOUSE: And you said how long you did that, but I’ve forgotten. Did you say how long you did that?

DONAHUE: Up there on the roof?

HOUSE: Yes.

DONAHUE: Oh boy [laughs] See it would have been to about ’94, ’89 to 94.
HOUSE: Okay, so you did that a good long time?

DONAHUE: Oh it was fun. [laughs]

HOUSE: So you've been at the Market then since ’89?

DONAHUE: I think so, yeah.

Dan at the Market in 1989
[large red spot to his left is damage on original photo]

HOUSE: So then in ’94 how did—you moved into other things?

DONAHUE: No, no, no, we were still raising things on the greenhouse and I ran into a fellow at one of our markets. We sold at a lot of markets and he wanted to know if I was interested in selling vegetables. And I said sure. And so he invited me up to Pennsylvania. We looked at his property and started planting. We planted things for a while and brought them to the Market here, which raised a ruckus.

HOUSE: Why?
DONAHUE: Well first of all it was pretty good stuff. Second of all we put prices on it, and third of all we didn’t charge as much as everybody else was charging.

HOUSE: Okay. But you raised this yourself?

DONAHUE: At one time, yes, we did that for about three years.

HOUSE: Okay.

DONAHUE: And then the Amish were, when we have a crop failure, they’d come and laugh at us and show us what we were doing wrong. [laughs] So finally we stuck up a deal that I wouldn’t grow any more if they wouldn’t drive. And we started bringing their things in. And pretty soon—the quality was excellent and much better than what we could do—and then they had relatives of course who would say, “Well why don’t you bring some this stuff in?” Well the next thing you know we’re talking about 84 different families over a 10 year period of time—we developed into that.

HOUSE: Wow. That’s what it is now?

DONAHUE: No it isn’t, because of the fire.

HOUSE: So before the fire?

DONAHUE: Yes, easily yes. And I’m not talking—I mean we would do business with perhaps one family for, like, two weeks. Or a group of families that were growing just a little bit of stuff. And sometimes they would have a crop failure also which wouldn’t work. And when it didn’t work they didn’t have anything. So we wouldn’t carry that particular thing. Now also it was timing, for example cherries would all come into—they’d be ready for the market on Tuesday. And we wouldn’t, certainly wouldn’t bring them in on Tuesday. [laughs]

HOUSE: Sure.

DONAHUE: You know, so. Because of the weather conditions they’d have quit picking. The wind would knock the cherries down, so …

HOUSE: So are these farms all located in a certain area?

DONAHUE: They stretch from the Maryland-Pennsylvania border above Frederick all the way to, let’s see, Lancaster, and then up to Duncannon in Perry County in Pennsylvania.

HOUSE: And so did you drive around to each one of these farms and pick them up?
DONAHUE: Yes. Well, we knew what was going on. We kept records and knew what was happening.

HOUSE: You made a comment earlier that you said, “We made a deal with them, we wouldn’t raise any more if they wouldn’t drive anymore?”

DONAHUE: Right. [laughs] Their driving was akin to our, ahem, our crop outcome.

HOUSE: Oh, I see, they did drive, but did not very well. I get it, okay they weren’t doing everything by carriage.

DONAHUE: We supplement their farming stuff through produce auctions in Pennsylavia that bring in some interesting things that nobody grows. Like currents or gooseberries or wild cherries—ground cherries. And that’s how we met the popcorn people.

HOUSE: I missed that.

DONAHUE: Popcorn people?

HOUSE: You’re selling popcorn as well?

DONAHUE: Oh, yes.

HOUSE: Oh, how did I miss that?

DONAHUE: Oh no, it’s not popped.

HOUSE: I understand, I understand, but its popping corn or whatever, right?

DONAHUE: Yes, exactly that’s how I should have phrased it.

HOUSE: No, I just didn’t notice it. So all of your produce now comes from these Amish farms?

DONAHUE: No, because the way we’re structured at Eastern Market, we need enough crop to satisfy the desires of the customer base. And what happens with that is that you can’t all the time. So we supplement—for example, people want lemons and limes. I looked all over—I can’t find an Amish guy who would grow lemons and limes. So we bring them in. And it happened quite by accident because we’re working out there and I had a bunch of guys working and picking stuff and everything else like that and they were thirsty. And one of the Spanish guys suggested that we buy some lemons and limes and squeeze them into the water. And sure enough, it’s a thirst quencher when you’re out there. I had a bunch left over. They were on the truck and never took them off the truck. Brought them to the Market and sold them. Well, we sold out in like 20 minutes. Went, “Oh, oh, looks good.” [laughs]
HOUSE: So those you get here, or you get those—?

DONAHUE: Well yes. We deal with the small businesses.

HOUSE: So you get things from several different places.

DONAHUE: Oh, constantly, different kinds of sources. We go to a wholesaler, we go to an auction, we go to the farm. And sometimes I cut stuff out of the backyard.

HOUSE: You’re still raising things?

DONAHUE: Unh uh. Not what I would call that, you know.

HOUSE: Dandelion tea or something?

DONAHUE: No, I guess more specifically that would be like tarragon or spearmint or something like that.

HOUSE: Okay. You mentioned an auction?

DONAHUE: Yes.

HOUSE: I’m not familiar with that.

DONAHUE: Auctions, well—first of all, if you deal with the Amish, they come from a Germanic background. They’re very hard working and they overproduce. And so what happens with that is they group together as a cooperative or a collective and they try to sell their items to, like for example grocery stores and things like that. So they have two ways of doing it. They open up a wholesale produce auction and they open up a retail kind of operation also where you can spend hours and hours buying flowers and produce at these places.

HOUSE: So it’s retail, not wholesale?

DONAHUE: It is wholesale also. It’s primarily wholesale. Although one would wonder sometimes.

HOUSE: Okay. So you go to several different locations for these?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm. And then we meet farmers there too. And they’ll say, you know, come see me at the farm, I’ll sell you my corn. And we’ll go there, you know, while we’re up there. But you can—you have to—it’s kind of like playing an accordion. You have to move it in and out all the time, you know, to make music. Because if you just kept it in one spot, nobody would hear anything. So that’s how we kind of do it.
HOUSE: So you spend several days a week in Pennsylvania?

DONAHUE: Three at maximum. I try for three at maximum, okay?

HOUSE: And are you the only person that goes up from there?

DONAHUE: It’s very hard to train people to do what I do. It’s a matter of taste and understanding. I came from a medical background and I understand how things work. And then from the horticultural aspect, I know how they grow. And it’s nothing like kicking dirt in field and avoiding a horse and putting a pH meter in and testing to see what you got—

HOUSE: And so you do all that?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HOUSE: Okay, so you go up, you meet with all these different farmers, you make arrangements, not just for things you’re are going to buy that week but for the future as well?

DONAHUE: [laughs] Yes. We did buy into the future. Whew. Prior to the fire we had 40,000 ears of corn on hold for us.

HOUSE: Wow. So you paid for that already?

DONAHUE: No. They are a very understanding group of people. But I helped them sell it other places. You know, you do what you got to do.

HOUSE: Okay, well that’s interesting. Let’s see. One of the things I’ve noticed is that some of your produce is produced without pesticides.

DONAHUE: Correct.

HOUSE: And you mentioned that you have some unique things like the popping corn. Are there other things that you sell that you think is particularly unique?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm. Let’s see—ground cherries work, they’re unique—oh boy.

HOUSE: Ground cherries grow on the ground?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm. It’s pretty much a weed but they’re delicious.

HOUSE: I guess I don’t know them.

DONAHUE: Okay.
HOUSE: Recently you’ve been selling the Havana bread.

DONAHUE: Oh yes. [laughs]

HOUSE: Havana Banana bread I think it’s what it’s called?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm.

HOUSE: It’s good too, I had some.

DONAHUE: It is, it’s excellent. One of the guys that we used to buy produce from, his wife was a baker. And they weren’t Amish. They were just good old fashioned, as the Amish refer to those kind of folks, as Englishmen. And they produced—she produced actually—a group of cookies that were to die for and we brought them to Washington.

HOUSE: I remember those.

DONAHUE: [laughs] Okay.

HOUSE: But you sold them like two or three in a—

DONAHUE: Threes and six packs, yes. They were phenomenal. And they were getting old and they retired and sold the bakery to a woman out of Philadelphia who immediately put in Starbucks renovations into this quaint little place at the top of this very icy hill in the winter and very slippery in the rain, hail in the summer. I’m a flat land kind of person. Keep me on flat land, I’m happy. And more often than not, I would have Roy meet me down at the bottom of the hill because I don’t like going up and down hills. And once she bought it and fired the institutional staff with all their knowledge, and changed the recipes. And six months later she was out of business.

HOUSE: Oh, I’m sorry and we won’t have those cookies anymore.

DONAHUE: That’s why we have the Havana Banana bread. And it’s been a pretty big gap between the time we had the cookies to find something reasonable and tastes good to bring to the Market. And we’ve been looking ever since that time. You know, I really have to admit I went two sizes down in my pants size because I didn’t have any of those cookies.

HOUSE: Oh! [laughs]

DONAHUE: I think it was the milk that actually does it.
HOUSE: I don’t know how to compare the farmer stands. I mean, I suppose if one knew the amounts you sold, but just looking at the tables and all, yours appears to be one of the larger ones. Is that—?

DONAHUE: It was. Before the fire, it was one of the largest. We had 600 square feet.

HOUSE: And you had several employees, right?

DONAHUE: Nine.

HOUSE: Nine.

DONAHUE: Volunteers is all I like to call them. Because they’d like to come and as they wished. [laughs] It’s hard to get up at six in the morning, you know. Or be at work at six actually.

HOUSE: Yes, yes that’s why I live on the Hill. Things start later here. Your Red Sox pennant is almost like a logo for your stand. Or do you have—is there a name of your stand?

DONAHUE: Agora Farms.

HOUSE: Agora Farms, see I missed that and I see the Red Sox pennant.

DONAHUE: Right. I can’t find a banner that we have for Agora. Agora means “market place” in Greek. In a sense if you take the translation and you put “Market Place Farms,” in essence that’s what we do.

HOUSE: Farmer’s market.

DONAHUE: We take farms to the market place.

HOUSE: Right.

DONAHUE: The Amish won’t get stuff here. We fill a niche. The Amish men—a lot people won’t come to Washington. For example, the egg lady, which is Amy and her husband and her son and her daughter-in-law, just have a phenomenal operation. Very low, very small, very easy going. In which they raise their own grain. They don’t use, for example any chemicals in the production of their eggs. Now the eggs—the chickens are walk-about chickens. And you know, sometimes they’re inside, sometimes they’re outside. And they have a large collection of cats. And I’ve never seen an egg like this in my life I mean, if you’re going cook it sunny side up, you’d need sunglasses. It has a phenomenal taste, so. But she won’t come to Washington to sell her eggs.

HOUSE: So do you sell her eggs?

DONAHUE: A small farm, yes.
HOUSE: I didn’t notice that, okay.

DONAHUE: Very small farm. We don’t sell them all the time right now because there’s no business at the Market. We were selling probably 90 dozen a weekend, which, you know, she had to make the chickens work hard to earn it.

HOUSE: I’ll have to try those when come back. So we’re going to talk about the fire, but let’s—let me ask you again about the Red Sox banner.

DONAHUE: Oh, that thing, okay. Well first of all it came with my birth certificate. And it just happened to work out, and which I got it as a gift, probably in ’95 or ’96. And I put it in the back of the truck and I totally forgot about it. And one day I was at the Market and I was looking for something in the back of the truck and I went, “What’s this? Oh!” And we hung it up. And let me tell you I didn’t know that there were that many Red Sox fans in Washington. Hundreds.

HOUSE: And you recently told me you sold some tickets for a game?

DONAHUE: Well what we did—I wanted to go to the game and I knew that there’s a few people who would want to go. So I sent the Nats an email saying that I would like to have 30 tickets to the Nats-Red Sox World Series game. And I left them my phone number and the next morning at 9:05 they called me. And we had this great chuckle [laughs]. So, and I said, “Yes, I’ll take 30 tickets.” And they took my credit card and they made the transaction. And I said, “but you know, I’m going to put a sign up in the [Market] stand, you know, so may end up with 35 or 40, so let me know.” So, okay, a few days later I
called and I said, “you know those 30 tickets I have, can you make that 60, and I’ll call you on Monday because I’m keep this sign up again?” Well, the next week it was 150 and then finally I said, “Look, we’re going to stop it at 275 if you don’t mind.” [laughs] So that’s what we did.

HOUSE: [laughs] So when is the game?

DONAHUE: June 24th.

HOUSE: Oh, so it’s coming up just before the opening of the Market.

DONAHUE: Oh yes, correct. What a time to have this now.

HOUSE: Wow that’s going to be a great party. You’re going to have two in a row.

DONAHUE: Oh, well actually it’s a little bit more like work on both ends of it for me, because I work with Tim Temple from Splash car wash. And we managed to put it on a spreadsheet and work it out so that everybody would be compatible.

HOUSE: Where they’re sitting?

DONAHUE: Yes. You know my insurance agent who I’ve never seen took 17 tickets. He’s down in Richmond and I’ve been dealing with him since, well, since I’ve been in business. Never seen him. He’s got a New England accent, that’s how I know he’s a Red Sox fan and that’s how we started off. And that’s why I did business with him, so—[laughs].

HOUSE: So you are going to wear something that shows your Red Sox you think?

DONAHUE: I would suggest you all watch TV because we have something interesting planned.

HOUSE: Oh, okay, alright.

DONAHUE: It will be in my usual way, I suppose.

HOUSE: So, I just remembered before we get off the subject of the things you sold in the past. When you walked in here and saw the cactus in my tree box you said [that] you brought cactus to the Hill. So that was something you were doing early on, were selling—

DONAHUE: Yes, that came off the roof.

HOUSE: Oh that was part of the roof, huh?
DONAHUE: Yes, and we were working in southern Maryland around Chaptico back then a little bit, and we were piddling around with cut flowers at the time, which did not work. It just requires too much time and attention. We didn’t have it. But then someone said, “Here, try this cactus, see if that works.” We put it in and, the next thing I know, I have all this cactus.

HOUSE: These are these prickly pears.

DONAHUE: Yes, whatever you want to call them. I have a different word for those, but you won’t find it in the dictionary. But, yes I brought them and put them up on the roof and pretty much left them alone. And every time they were in bloom Friday night, I would gently put them on the truck, because sometimes I would experience them putting them on a truck on a Friday night and Saturday morning there would be no bloom. [laughs]

HOUSE: They only bloom for a day I think.

DONAHUE: Yes.

HOUSE: Different ones would bloom hopefully the next day, right?

DONAHUE: Yes, and you know, I sold the daylights out of them.

HOUSE: Well they’re very popular here, I thank you for them. And also in some of the photographs that you were going to loan us, you have tropical plants.

DONAHUE: Oh we did, yeah. Gee whiz, let's look at that. There was a fellow who used to come up from Florida, and Tom Ross was his name, and he would sell next to Carlton. Well, we had some landscape material, too, here too.

HOUSE: Sell next to Carlton?

DONAHUE: Carlton Frye, he sold flowers on the corner. He recently passed away. And they were buddy-buddies on flowers. So we were doing other markets also. I think we were doing nine markets a week, something absurd like that. And we started bringing tropical plants around. And they were selling at the other markets and Eastern. When he wasn’t here he was selling them So the deal was, he brought them up to us from Florida and we sold the daylights out of them, so.

HOUSE: Huh. So you mentioned you’re selling at other markets now as well, right?

DONAHUE: Just a few now, yes.

HOUSE: Are they in DC or in the area?
DONAHUE: Yes in the area. One in DC and two in Maryland and one in Virginia.

HOUSE: But Eastern Market is your largest?

DONAHUE: Eastern Market is my love. OK?

HOUSE: Oh great, oh good.

DONAHUE: Let me go back to how … Kent Ash, who’s deceased, I’ve known him for years. I would go shopping at Eastern Market also. And when he was down here on the weekends, you know, I would go to the Market and during the week I would go to the Market. I was very distressed that Sunday and Monday they weren’t open at that particular time. And so, I would have to suffer or buy a whole lot of food on Saturday like everybody else does now. And I explained to him that we went belly up, the guy destroyed the construction company. And, I was selling my plants at different places. He said, “Well come in, come into the Market.” He slipped me right in. And I obtained a second to last license from the Department—DCRA Weights and Measures was handling it. And there was one license issued after mine.

HOUSE: At Eastern Market. And what year was that again?

DONAHUE: ’89.

HOUSE: ’89. Do you still have that license?

DONAHUE: Some place. Please don’t ask me for the document.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1
TAPE 1/SIDE 2

HOUSE: So, you have that license still?

DONAHUE: Some place along the line I have a file folder and the licenses are in there.

HOUSE: And it tells you what space is it?

DONAHUE: When I went in with Kent Ashe I would share his space. And then when he would bring larger stuff in, they would move me. And there was a fellow, Mr. Evans, who was the market master at the time who worked for the health department also. And he would inspect us, and assign spaces. So he would move me when other people were coming. He’d say, “Well, I was in that particular corner for a while, they’re coming in in the end of June and so you won’t have that space this summer.” So I would find another space along the wall. And then finally I did some research on the Eastern Market and ran across the Eastern Market legislation law that established the Eastern Market which is a horse shoe of farmers all around the Market from North Carolina [Avenue] down C [Street] and across Seventh [Street].
So I called Weights and Measures and said, “I’d like that space down there.” They said, “Well it’s—we haven’t put any numbers on it.” And the chief says to me, “Well, you know, why don’t we just assign you as an unassigned space.” I said, “Which is fine.” And Mr. Evans came down on a Saturday and we talked about it and then I unloaded my truck. And he said, “This is you.” I said, “Okay.” And that was the beginning of C Street. It’s like ’92.

**House:** And do you have to be there by a certain time or something?

**Donahue:** Well, there was a war [laughs], which required me to be there before the other guy. And let’s put it that way. The last permit issued—that fellow was a peach grower out of West Virginia. And what he would do is he would come down—I would be set up and he would down and set up right in front of me in the crosswalk. There’s a hundred square foot area where the crosswalks come together. And that’s a pedestrian zone. He would set up there. As opposed to up against the wall or as Mr. Evans would tell him. “Past Donahue, you know, use some common sense.” Okay that’s where he’s supposed to be. Well he didn’t want to do that. And then Gary Abrecht, okay, the former police chief of Capitol Hill. He came around one day and he told him, you know, “You got about 30 minutes to move this stuff or I’ll send over the guys who will confiscate it and you’ll never see it again.” He says, “You either move up against the wall or down there, and that’s it. And I’ll fine you $300.” So they moved. Well, they didn’t come back to the Market—well they did for a little while. But the two kids that were running it, I guess they were his sons or his relatives, got caught smoking pot in the bathroom upstairs in [laughs] the Market.

**House:** There by the pottery?

**Donahue:** Yes, you know. I mean, look if you’re going to go do that, go outside and do it. [laughs] Don’t be stupid. Yeah, that’s one of the little stories.

**House:** Well, let’s talk about the Eastern Market fire.

**Donahue:** Are you going to bring up the turtle later?

**House:** Well, any time, I’ll make a note of it. So let’s talk about the fire.

**Donahue:** I didn’t do it. I want to let you know that despite what you’ve heard … You know, whatever goes wrong at Eastern Market, I’m not involved in everything that goes wrong. [laughs]

**House:** [laughs] I didn’t—I wasn’t going to say that, of course, but I was out of town when it happened and so as a result I don’t remember what day of the week it happened on.
DONAHUE: It was a Sunday night.

HOUSE: It was a Sunday night. So do you remember when and how you heard about it? I guess it was on the news here.

DONAHUE: I got an email. No, no, no. It was Monday, so I was up at my usual time. I do what’s called a Monday morning eye opener. It’s a collection—well you should read it before you start your week so it puts a smile on your face so you get a good attitude on. It’s just a series of little stories. Not very long, because we want you to come back to work real quick. And besides I don’t want to work that hard at four o’clock on a Monday morning. Yes, I was reading, checking the mail—not the mail, but the news, WTOP. They say they had a fire. So I dashed out of my work, jumped in the shower and zoomed down here. And the fire department was still here and everything else. I got down here about ten o’clock that morning, so. Yes, it’s most unfortunate. People were just in tears.

HOUSE: Mm hmm, so you were off—did you stop coming to the Market for a while?

DONAHUE: Well, when the fire happened, the word got out that Eastern Market was closed, somehow, okay, which the inside was. Well, that following Saturday, all the farmers were there, ready to go.

HOUSE: Oh, they were there right after that?

DONAHUE: Yes, the farmers’ line never shut down, okay. We didn’t miss a beat, okay. We were there—

HOUSE: I thought it did for a little while, but that’s because I’m wrong—

DONAHUE: No, not at all. No. The inside guys shut down.

HOUSE: Right, and some of them were helped to move outside for part of the time.

DONAHUE: Yes, and the farmers got in there and helped them—showed them how to sell outside, which is a unique animal to say the least. You have crop protection and all kind of stuff you have to worry about. You know, when we go to the Market, we sweep down sometimes—well, when Eastern Market vultures, I’m sorry Ventures, were there we physically had to scrub the site down with Clorox and stuff like that. And degreaser, okay?

HOUSE: Wow.

DONAHUE: We’d never get a clean stand. Although we always left it [laughs] much better than what we found it, because the grease from the dumpsters would come down the street. It was horrible. And we’d
find glass and all that kind of stuff, but that was their problem. They should’ve solved it. So we never shut down and we—everyone—helped, pitched in to show them how to set up a tent and everything else like that, so we never shut down for the Market. They closed the street and cut off our business. Which is understandable, because we had to relocate the inside merchants outside. And I can understand that with their big trucks and everything else going on like that, and the first few weeks post fire was, you know, the fire department’s got to get in there and do this that and the other. The arson people; the insurance folks have to come. All that kind of crazy stuff. It had to go on and I can understand the street being closed.

HOUSE: And the sidewalk was closed too where a lot of the farmers set up, right, right in front of the Market? Because of the work going on there?

DONAHUE: Well, no that was a safety issue there because they put up the fence around there. And it pretty much, I think if I remember correctly, bordered up to the shed so that there would be a safety barrier in case something broke loose, you know. And to help in the cleanup because you could just push stuff out the windows. So, I mean, that was taken care of nicely. So, they closed the street and they moved us around. They moved me out in the street and they moved me back over to my spot on Seventh Street, then decided to drop the trailer on my spot and moved me back out on Seventh Street [East side facing center of street], which was, I don’t know, [exasperated sigh] I don’t particularly think that that was the right spot for the trailer. There were plenty of other places to put it, but they took me out of retail space. When we went back out into the street and set up our tents and everything else like that. Our crop was burning up in the afternoon because that late afternoon sun burns right into it. Set up double tents and they told me I couldn’t do that. So, we kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller as far as the stuff we could bring to the Market. But it worked out because the crowds kept getting smaller and smaller.

So when they opened up the East Hall, I thought they would open up the street because in any disaster you try to restore the part that has been damaged to get it as functioning as close as possible to its original purpose. The Market would have been rebuilt sooner or later, but it was still an ongoing operation. And what you really needed was to bring people back to the Market. Back to where they could park or back to where they could shop. And so they kept the street open once they opened up the east side of the street and we tried and tried and tried to make it work and couldn’t. Not that we had a responsive management team in place and a government operation didn’t quite gel with what was going on also. And there was some political issues there too—by keeping the street closed which is still ongoing.

HOUSE: And do you want to say anything about those?
DONAHUE: I beg your pardon?

HOUSE: Do you want say something about those?

DONAHUE: Well, it always gets me into trouble. [laughs]

HOUSE: Okay, well I’m just allowing you, I’m not—

DONAHUE: Oh, I don’t have a problem with that at all, I mean, I think the T in my middle name is part of that also. I’m not one to hold back despite the ramifications which there have been some, so. Yes, I talked to [City Council member] Tommy Wells about opening up the street. I said, “Tommy we’ve been into this for six months now. The Christmas season is coming, is going to come along. We sell a lot of Christmas trees at Eastern Market here and you know, you tried this for six months. It didn’t work—how about opening it up for six months to see if it works?” Because the brick and mortar people—Christmas is good portion of everybody’s income. It helps us to sell Christmas trees to carry over through the winter, okay. And this was the first winter that we didn’t sell at the Market in 17 years. And people relied on us for stuff because there’s still Pennsylvania greenhouse product coming up. There’s still high quality organic stuff available from California to bring in during the Market. You still have to meet the people’s nutritional needs. You know, we still like to make money. And when you make money you put people to work. And when you put people to work they are able to feed their families too. So, I mean, it’s just a, just a cycle. But if you interrupt it because you don’t think that the street should be open so people could around with strollers. I almost got hit with a bicycle and two strollers on Saturday alone, just crossing the street. And they worry about pedestrians crossing the street when they have vehicular traffic there. Well, in the many years that I’ve been at the Market, I’ve never seen a pedestrian get hit. And there are other ways to control it besides closing the street. Shame on me.

Well, anyway, because the street was closed, because we couldn’t obtain suburban traffic, I missed customers who would come from McLean, and Maryland, and you name it, who would come in and buy $30 or $40 worth of vegetables from me every week. Not only that, they were burdened with—God knows how much money they spent inside the Market to take home. The Market’s a regional food market, not a two zip code market. So when these people couldn’t come here, they went other places. And then when we set up markets outside [away from Eastern Market] they go, “Oh you’re here, oh good, thank you. You know, we’re closer. Are you going to be here?” “No, when Eastern Market street opens up we’ll go back.” And that’s what we did. Unfortunately, we became popular and made the Washington Post and a couple of other things—and Spanish TV out in Virginia. [laughs] That’s what happens to us and all when you do things.
HOUSE: So when did you then leave the Market?

DONAHUE: We gave it a year from … The fire was 2007 and I believe we left …

HOUSE: Last summer sometime?

DONAHUE: December of that year.

HOUSE: Oh, December. So you weren’t there at all last summer?

DONAHUE: Weren’t here all last year. We weren’t here in 2008.

HOUSE: Okay, I know I looked for you too.

DONAHUE: Yes. And I mean I paid my guys every single week, all of them.

HOUSE: Even when they weren’t working?

DONAHUE: Well, they were working. I put them to work. They would stand around and look, you know. I gave as much work as I could wherever we could.

HOUSE: I see, other places.

DONAHUE: Not so much other places. I got a lot done around the house, let me put it to you that way [laughs]. A lot!

HOUSE: And then, I guess, was it just the spring?

DONAHUE: Mm hmm, about two months ago, I guess.

HOUSE: But you came back on North Carolina [Avenue SE].

DONAHUE: Well, actually we came back, let me see, was it February or March—February. It must have been February because we made the March issue of the Hill Rag. They put a spread in about us, “Oh, he’s back.” I go, “Oh God.” You know, so they gave us, I think, one or two tents. Started off—well, one day they gave us one tent. Another day they let us put up two tents but only occupy a tent and three quarters. Then the very next day they moved us underneath a shed and gave us, I think, 50 square feet. And then back out to the street again to the tent and three quarters. And then when they decided to close the street for the construction—or had to close the street for construction—they gave us two tents up on the north…

HOUSE: The repaving or whatever?
DONAHUE: They gave us two tents up on the north plaza but they didn’t give anybody any signage and they didn’t do that with any particular respect for the seniority at the Market.

HOUSE: So you said they gave you tents—they gave you tent space?

DONAHUE: Tent space, I’m sorry.

HOUSE: But you furnished your own tents?

DONAHUE: We have to, yes. Last thing you want to be in is a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] tent. [laughs]

HOUSE: [laughs] So then last week you were back on Seventh Street. Well you were on Seventh Street. I don’t know if you have actually been on Seventh Street, you were on—

DONAHUE: One time, one time, we were underneath the shed for one day. It was some kind of, I don’t know what it was. It was a holiday or something. We came in and we asked if we could come in and do it. And they said yes. And we showed up and had some fun, so.

HOUSE: So are you going to be there under the shed on Seventh Street now? Or are you—

DONAHUE: You know, I haven’t the slightest idea and neither do they and we won’t know, and we won’t know for sure or certain—I’m not even too sure we if we get it done this week. Let me just tell you—go back to the fire. Okay. When we operated at the Market, we had to—we grew into our success one tenth at a time. And it was kind of risky to do that. And when we did that I couldn’t figure out how to do it. The more food I would bring in. the more we would sell. Okay, then there were some days that we didn’t sell anything, because of the rain, or didn’t sell at all. So I made a deal with the Committee for Creative Non-Violence to send a truck up on Sunday nights to pick up food.

HOUSE: Because you sell both Saturday and Sunday?

DONAHUE: Yes. But, you know, when we carry it over, we put it in a cooler and keep it iced down. We bring it in iced to begin with and we maintain that nutritional integrity, or try to anyway. And so the shelter was coming on a regular basis to pick up food. And the driver was kind of a gruffy old guy, you know and he says, “Is this all I’m getting?” I go, “Okay, yeah, look Gregg, this is what I’ll do for you, I’ll order extra.” And so I would. And we ordered extra and we put it out and we’d sell it. I’d go, “Well, my theory was we have to order more for the shelter [laughs], not for the business.” So I would order more stuff, okay, and I would ask what they liked down there, and he would tell me and we would order it, and we’d sell it. So this is how we grew. Purely by accident in trying to get items to the shelter. On a rainy
day like I said, they’d get a whole lot, you know. And also, I have that attitude about—you know you have to give back before you can take. Or you have to give before you can take because, you know, it doesn’t always work. We would pile up grains for the Red Cross. And how it was, is you came in and the sign said, “Take what you want, donate what you can, all the proceeds to the Red Cross.” And I just ran into Linda Mathis the other day who was telling me that they sure miss our donations because—I guess 9/11 when we did that—and I’m not talking we gave the money. Capitol Hill residents gave the money, or our customers gave the money. I think we gave them something around $11,000.

**HOUSE:** Wow. Didn’t you have the horseshoes for the Amish?

**DONAHUE:** Yes. We did that, yes. It was rather interesting.

**HOUSE:** After the fire, right?

**DONAHUE:** No, it was prior to the fire, I think. It was when the massacre up in …

**HOUSE:** Yes. I was thinking they had a fire, but they didn’t have a fire. It was the children.

**DONAHUE:** Yes, the children had been shot. It was interesting because we’d buy the horseshoes from them. I would pay them for the horseshoes, they wouldn’t donate them. I said, “I don’t want you to donate them. I’ll pay you for them.” We paid for them. We took them down here and sold them for … I think I gave them two bucks a horseshoe in my money. And then we told them we took them down here and sold them for five, and took all their money. If we sold a hundred horseshoes, we’d send them up five hundred bucks and gave the money to one of the fellows. The only time that money was on a truck, which was my truck, and it went from carriage to carriage to what the county referred to as the “Amish pony express.” And so they got some money like that, too. And when 9/11 hit, we had a bunch of citrus at that particular time, and people were coming to the Market and just buying cases of stuff from us and we were giving it to them wholesale cost plus a buck. And they were just taking it over to the Pentagon all day long. So you know that’s what we did, and still like to do.

**HOUSE:** So there was that issue of whether or not the farmers could bring their trucks now behind their stands on Seventh. That seems, at least last week, the trucks were there. So the street’s closed to the general public but the farmers’ trucks are there. So that’s a big relief, I’m sure.

**DONAHUE:** Well, I don’t see how it could work any other way.

**HOUSE:** Some of the farmers told me that same thing. But there’s still some petitions to open Seventh Street?
DONAHUE: There’s a community swell to open up Seventh Street, not just petitions.

HOUSE: I just mention I’ve seen petitions at some of the merchants …

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, they’re out there. I collected 400 names for that when I did that also.

HOUSE: Oh, okay. One of the things I’ve noticed being at your stand is you seem to have a personal relationship with so many of your customers. You know so many of them by name.

DONAHUE: Well, I have a compatible insanity approach to life and a neighborly kind of thing is if you don’t know your neighbor, who do you know? You have to develop a contact and part of the contact is trying to make it an enjoyable experience at the Market. I learned in the Navy when you sit somebody down for a pretty serious operation, you don’t want them going in nervous. And when you go to the grocery store here, it’s such a boring, impersonal experience. So you make it a little different. And over the years, we’ve just developed stuff. I walk down the street and people say “hi” to me, and I go [gestures] and they call me by my name. I can’t drink a cup of coffee on Capitol Hill uninterrupted. My mom always told me to, “be nice to people until … well, you’ll find out when not to be nice“. That’s how she phrased it.

HOUSE: Knowing the names of course is a unique thing. I thought maybe that was a part of the Boston … You seem to know a lot of the names!

DONAHUE: Yes, but let me tell you, if you’re crossing the street in Boston, and there’s people there, they’ll talk to each other. They even talk to each other in elevators.

HOUSE: That is unique.

DONAHUE: Yes. And that’s the old neighborhood thing. But it’s not just generally about Boston. It’s about most of the people in the country, I think.

HOUSE: I think it’s true about this neighborhood too.

DONAHUE: This neighborhood is, believe it or not, really, it’s a family, it’s a collection. And just like families, they squabble. But most of the time, they do the right thing.

HOUSE: Well, do you have any stories that you would like to share? Fellow vendors, customers, whatever?

DONAHUE: I’ll tell you the turtle story.

HOUSE: Okay, tell me the turtle story.
DONAHUE: We put out a bowl of water. I did it kind of by accident. When I was draining a cooler one day and it was coming out of the back of the truck, the water was coming out of the cooler; this dog broke away from the owner’s leash and ran over and started licking water. So I said, “Hold on a second,” and I found some kind of container and put it down there and filled it up. And I said, “Well, as long as it’s filled, we’ll put dog water out there.” So we put this dog dish over there by this little sign that we had where we posted our prices. Other dogs would stop in and I’d go “Hey, I’ve got to fill up the dog water dish“. I went, “Hey, it’s a little dish.” So we got a bigger dish and we had to keep filling it up and filling it up. I don’t know if you know about having to work all day long, but the least amount tasks amount of tasks you have to do over and over again … I mean, it gets boring. So what you do is you get a bigger dish. Finally I got this 24-inch, deep dish that you put plants in, a plant saucer. And I got three of them and put them together and it made it really nice and thick. And filled it up full of water and the dogs would sure enough come in. I had one dog that would come in and put his whole “snoot” into the bottom of the dish and the water would be up to his ears, and that’s how he drank. And it was always a hoot. So, you’ve got people who really don’t pay any attention to what’s going on at the Market and they’re stepping in the dog water dish, knocking it over, breaking it, that kind of stuff. So one day, I went out to the garden and I got a turtle, put him on the back of the truck, and drove into the city, put up the dog water dish, took the turtle out of the back of the truck and put it there. Well, that attracted all kinds of attention. People would come by and look, kids would try and play with it, things like that. German tourists would try to feed it.

HOUSE: Who’d try to feed it?

DONAHUE: I call them German tourists. These cute little folks on their bicycle things, with little snacks … They were a lot of fun to deal with and you couldn’t understand what they were saying so I’d say, “Okay, fine.” So one day it was the middle of peach season and we are just jam-packed. The stand is full. Everybody’s doing whatever they can to restock the peaches and get bags. We’re running out of stuff and running out of stuff. This door slams. A truck pulls up and the doors slam and these two folks walk out like they’re cops. A girl and a guy. And sure enough, they have light-tan uniforms on and they come walking up and they say, “Who owns this place?” And I go, “I do. What’s going on?” And they flash badges. They’re from the Humane Society. “Okay, what can we do for you?” “So we have a complaint that you have a turtle sitting out in the sun.” I go, “Yeah, I do.” “You can’t have it in the sun.” I said, “Well, you know, I hate to tell you this, but it’s an amphibian, it’s cold-blooded, they bask in the sun. There’s poetry about it if you’re interested.” “Nope, nope. Can’t have it in the sun.” I said, “What happens if I don’t take it out of the sun?” They said, “We’ll cite you and you’ll have to appear someplace and pay a fine.” I go, “Alright.” So I picked up the turtle, and they’re standing in the sun, and in the
meantime, everybody stops what they’re doing in my stand and they’re watching this. So I go, “Okay. Let’s have some fun.” So they’re in the shade of the tent, and I say, “Well, where would you like to have this turtle?” And they said, “Inside the tent?” And I go, “Yes, that’s fine.” So I picked up the turtle and I threw it. It went over their heads and everybody’s watching the turtle. It lands behind them, bumpy, bumpy, bump, and flops over on its back. So they go running, people standing in line are going “Oh!” Most of them are laughing. They think this is a hoot. So they go running over to the turtle. They pick it up and go, “It’s rubber!” [laughter] “It’s a rubber turtle! We got complaints about a rubber turtle!” I go, “Yep.”

**HOUSE:** I didn’t know that! I’ve seen that turtle there. I didn’t realize it was rubber. It’s very realistic looking.

**DONAHUE:** Yeah. And then I tell them, “The turtle is in the big bowl because people keep walking into the big bowl and disrupting the dogs when they’re trying to drink.” So he says, “You’re watering the dogs? There’s nothing wrong here.”

A month or so after that, the turtle is stolen, and I’m telling you, kids were coming by going, “Where’s the turtle?” They go, “Holy cow!” Two women came by and said, “We’re organizing a vigilante group to find your turtle. We’re going to scour the neighborhoods and everything else like that.” And I go, “Fine, okay, this is great. This is good PR. For ten dollars, you can’t beat this.” You know, I mean, for ten dollars you couldn’t beat it with a stick when we put it in, just to protect the dogs. And so the Hill Rag came down and did a story on it. And this was when the Rag was publishing every two weeks. And they took pictures, you know, and they go, “Missing Turtle,” and everything else like that. So this lady comes down after the story appears and she offers a big gigantic Godzilla, a three-foot Godzilla.”

**END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2**

**TAPE 2/SIDE 1**

**DONAHUE:** There was a picture in the Hill Rag, of this three-foot Godzilla, offering a reward for the return of the turtle but the thief I don’t think read the [Hill Rag]. I suspect it was kids who were having some fun with it and we’ll never see it again. So I went looking for a turtle and went to the place where I originally bought it and they don’t make them any more. But in my search for the turtle, I now have a collection of ceramic and stone turtles [laughs] which don’t work. They’re not real. So the turtle was never returned.

**HOUSE:** That’s too bad.

**DONAHUE:** I’ll find another one if we get back on C Street.
HOUSE: That’s a great story. Any other stories?

DONAHUE: Not that I would care to print.

HOUSE: Well, we have a lot. I very much appreciate your coming over. Thank you.

DONAHUE: My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW