



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Jerry Mark

Interview Date: July 12, 2009
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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

HOUSE: Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview today. I appreciate you taking the time.

MARK: You're welcome.

HOUSE: We are here as part of the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project and we're interviewing Jerry Mark. It's part of the emphasis on the Eastern Market vendors. Today is July 12th. I'm the interviewer—my name is Sharon House and we're conducting the interview at my house on Capitol Hill. What is your full name?

MARK: My name is Jerry Mark.

HOUSE: Okay, and when and where were you born?

MARK: Born in 1937 in North Central Iowa. Little town called Iowa Falls.

HOUSE: And does your business have a name?

MARK: We do business as Jefferson Greenhouses.

HOUSE: Okay, who's the Jefferson?

MARK: I had the business originally in Jefferson County, West Virginia. Which is Charles Town area. And also named after the agriculturist, Thomas Jefferson.

HOUSE: Okay.

MARK: Who I like to think we had the same ideas about agriculture [laughs].

HOUSE: First, I want to ask you what you sell and then I'd like to hear more about your ideas about agriculture. How would you describe what you sell at the Market?

MARK: We sell primarily plants. And we have plants of different types. We have a section of herbs—herb plants and section of seasonal plants, perennial plants, hanging baskets, bedding plants. So we try to do a lot of diversity, but then also we do a few vegetables. I do some cherry tomatoes in the late summer and a few cut flowers. A few other vegetables that I grow, you know left over from my home garden. But primarily all kinds of flowering and vegetable plants.

HOUSE: And are you at the Market year round or how long are you at the Market?

MARK: No, basically we start toward the end of March. We say the first nice weekend in March and we continue through October into early November. But we don't do any Christmas stuff, like poinsettias or that kind of thing. We used to but over the last ... we used to go through December but we have scaled back our business some and we're doing just through October.

HOUSE: Tell me a little bit about your farm and where it is.

MARK: We have a 32 acre farm, primarily wooded, basically on the line between Virginia and West Virginia. It's at the end of a gravel road called Shockeyville Road. Shockeyville Road is at the base of Shockey Knob which is the border between Virginia and West Virginia. We have two greenhouses and an attached greenhouse to the house and we also have some open space between the two greenhouses for some outside things. Then we also have about an acre of fenced, electric fenced for deer, gardens—includes tomatoes and blueberries and we grow some cut flowers there. And also home vegetable garden. We moved there from Jefferson County, [ed: West] Virginia where I had a larger business. We had like 13 greenhouses—at that location we did a lot of wholesale but currently everything I grow is basically for Eastern Market, except for a little bit of wholesale for local folks. We used to sell at Washington Cathedral and Merrifield's and Behnke's—herbs, potted herb plants. Since the last three years I have sold that part of the business and we just do Eastern Market.

HOUSE: How many people help you work the farm?

MARK: We just have one other person. Myself and one other person and my wife.

HOUSE: How long of a drive is that, in to Eastern Market?

MARK: Well, takes me longer than most. It's about a little over two and half hours for me.

HOUSE: Wow.

MARK: Because I have quite a bit of back roads and I don't like to get on the big roads. I end up averaging maybe 50 miles per hour. It's about 100 miles.

HOUSE: That's a long day for you.

MARK: It is a long day. I leave home ... well, this morning I left home about 3:30 and I'll get back home about 8:30. So it's a long day.

HOUSE: Wow, and you just come on Saturday.

MARK: Just Saturday. Yeah. It's a long Market. A lot of farmers markets don't run all day. They run for like four hours so the day is shorter. But this is fine. I come into town once a week and that's all I have to do so ... and it's Saturday and traffic is light and actually it's kind of a nice drive.

HOUSE: How did you get started in the business?

MARK: Well, it seems like everything I have done kind of has led up to it. I grew up on a diversified dairy farm. We had dairy and hogs and chickens. And the cropping system was basically was rotation of corn, beans and pasture land. And probably that is my main influence. I was on the farm until I went off to college and I studied, my major was Ag Education. And so I taught vocational agriculture for a couple of years in Iowa. A lot of things have directed me in this direction. When I was just out of college I went on a youth exchange program, farm youth exchange program, to Jordan. That really helped me to see different kinds of agriculture and different ways of food production. As a part of this exchange we stayed on a farm near the Jordan River and they grew chickens and vegetables and sold in the Beirut Market. Very interesting time. I think, you know I learned from that everything is not like Iowa.

HOUSE: [Laughs]

MARK: I really didn't know that. I didn't know ... I tell you, Iowa is the only place I've ever seen that has topsoil like that. We had topsoil eight feet deep. We'd dig a ditch for pipes and there'd be topsoil five-six feet down. It's just amazing.

HOUSE: I guess along a river like a delta might have that too but ...

MARK: Well, delta would have that and also, I guess there's other places, you know I think of Ukraine maybe having that or I think there's a few places where they've had slower decomposition of grasslands and it's turned into peat and then peat into soil.

HOUSE: But it's not that way where you live now?

MARK: No, it's not.

HOUSE: [Laughs]

MARK: No, it's not. And it's not suitable for the kind of cropping they do in Iowa now. I mean, you know the commodity, or the corn and beans, where we are it's more suitable for the kind of agriculture we do, which is small plots, intensive farming, greenhouses. In the Midwest, there's rows a mile long. They turn around at the end of a mile long row and they're planting 12, 16 rows at a time. When they pick corn they do it the same way. A lot can be produced on a small piece of ground. Another thing that I did

that really had a big influence was that I worked for a period of time as farm manager, this was after I taught school for a couple of years, then I went ... had an opportunity to work at a demonstration farm. Sponsored by the Methodist Church actually in southeast Kentucky. My job was farm program director and we had a demonstration farm but we also, this was in the 60s so we were all very hopeful and optimistic about changing the economic situation in southeast Kentucky, over optimistic I'm sure. But my thought was from that work, that we needed to put more emphasis on low capital/high labor type operations which is just the opposite of what the Midwest was turning into. So we had a feeder pig co-op down there in southeast Kentucky. We organized a cooperative where we bought grain together from Ohio or Illinois then we sold that as a co-op to members. And we also took the feeder pigs, which are young 40 pound pigs, and we haul those as a cooperative back into Ohio. This gave an opportunity for people with small pieces of land to make a living or to hopefully to make a living. It added some to their income which is what we were hopeful for. And we were there from '66 through '74.

As a part of that I was also part of an organization called the Federation of Southern Cooperatives which was a group primarily, still in existence I think, centered down in Atlanta. It was an organization that helped cooperatives get started in the deep south. That was the real impetus for doing what I'm doing now which we were pretty hopeful that this business philosophy would work, of low capital/high labor. When the interest kind of faded in the church for doing economic development we had some contacts in West Virginia, some friends, and they found for us a piece of land, which we could rent, in West Virginia and that was Jefferson County. And so we moved up there to kind of prove to myself that you could create a low capital/high labor business and make a living. That was '74 and basically we've been doing it ever since and part of it works and part of it hadn't but basically it has worked.

HOUSE: So when did you start at the Market, Eastern Market?

MARK: '78.

HOUSE: '78. How did you happen to know about that? Did you ...

MARK: Well, I had been interested in farmers markets and at that time there were not a lot of markets to choose from. It happens that a friend, a couple of friends that I knew, from '74 to '78, three of those years I taught horticulture at a vocational school in Martinsburg, West Virginia. There were several people that I met through that work that came to Eastern Market and encouraged me to give it a try. So I quit teaching in '78 and that was our first year to come here, to Eastern Market.

HOUSE: You mentioned earlier that, just to go back a little bit, you had shared a philosophy with President Jefferson on agriculture, what is that?

MARK: Well, just the idea that you can be innovative with some new crops and new ideas. We haven't really done a whole lot with that. We've been working more on the business, trying to make a living. I've always felt like that Thomas Jefferson, as an inspiration to small farmers, he just enjoyed the work. He felt like it was important for people to be at the land. And I still think it is even though we're in the middle of a pretty big urban and suburban area, I'm pleased to see more people have their little garden plots and it doesn't take a lot of land to be back with your hands in the dirt. Not specific but just an inspiration to think there's new ways to do things.

HOUSE: Have the things you've sold at the Market changed a lot over the time you've been there?

MARK: It seems like there's always some changes. Herbs, herb plants have certainly increased in interest. People have more interest in culinary herbs and even medicinal herbs but primarily culinary herbs. Some bedding plants have diminished some in interest. People are more interested now in perennials and seasonal plants. We used to sell a lot of plants in cell packs and people seem to be more interested now in four inch pots or plants that are a little more developed. Although we still have some, we'll continue to do the cell packs because it is a cheaper way to buy plants. You know you get more plants for the dollar, but they aren't as big.

HOUSE: If they get started early they work fine.

MARK: Exactly. Yeah, there's nothing wrong with them. I'm trying to think of other things that have changed. I think as a market itself, I think that when we initially came to this Market there were probably more producers of the crops they sold and now I think we've lost a couple people over the years. I think some of that space has been filled in by people who raise some things but also truck in a lot of stuff. And that's okay, I mean these folks that do the trucking know where to buy really good stuff so there some good vegetables on the market that aren't necessarily produced by the people at the Market, but at the same time I'd like to see more emphasis on production.

HOUSE: There is no rule that you have to produce what you sell there, is there?

MARK: No, there is not. There are markets in the city that do have those rules. And they're good successful markets, one in Dupont Circle. They're Farm Fresh people who run those markets. There are several markets in the city that Fresh Farm, I think it's called, operate, they're all producer only. [ed: the official name is FRESHFARM Markets.]

HOUSE: And you mentioned they [ed: Eastern Market] lost some farmers who actually raised more or all of what they sold. Why do you think they left?

MARK: Well, in this case there was health or one person left because his knees got bad. I mean he just couldn't produce. And unfortunately two other people died. I don't know of people that have left because of disinterest. I think the people who have been producing, if they're able to are continuing. You know I don't know how many more years I can produce. I've got real good health, this woman who helps me at home is just excellent with production. She doesn't want to be involved in marketing but she's just an excellent producer. So as long as she's around I can continue and I think folks generally would like to continue because it's a good market. You know it's excellent way to sell what you grow. It feels good to be able to produce something from a seed and grow it up and bring it in and sell it and take home some money ...

HOUSE: ... and talk to the person who's going use it ...

MARK: It's a direct marketing and it's just a fun way to market. I've always enjoyed doing Eastern Market, even though it's a long day, I've felt like it's one of the most honest ways to make a living. And fun. We always said it was "show time." [Laughs]

HOUSE: [Laughs] Well I know you have a lot of fans there. What do you see as the future of the Market for the farmers?

MARK: I think this is an exciting time being in agriculture, food production, plant production. There's a lot of interest in farmers markets. A lot of interest in buying local. I just feel like it's really a great time to be involved and you don't have to be huge to have a satisfying business.

HOUSE: Mm hmm.

MARK: I think the future of the Market is just very hopeful. I think there is a lot of ways to do local marketing. I don't think it has to be done in any particular way. I mean there's the CSA—Community Supported Agriculture—organization. There's a lot of different farmers markets. A lot of different ways of doing farmers markets and I really think we really have to be pretty open minded about what will work and I think it's a good time to try a lot of different approaches. Although I still think that we need more, at Eastern Market, I'd like to see us have more producer farmers.

HOUSE: There are a few new producer farmers, right?

MARK: Absolutely, and they're good. Yeah. Yeah there are some new ones. But we've also lost some to attrition.

HOUSE: Does the Market management do anything to encourage or discourage that or ...?

MARK: Uh ...

HOUSE: I don't really know what the relationship is between Market management and farmers is anyway.

MARK: There is no ... the management now is pretty well occupied with taking care with what is already there. I think that at some point, once the Market opens up ... you know once we get over this period of opening the new building and the new street, hopefully there will be some thinking about how to bring new farmers into the Market. I'm sure the management right now is busy doing what they're doing and it's run by the OPM and they're just busy trying to take ... you know, I think fight fires as much as anything right now. If they do want more producers I think they're going to have to use a model like the Farm Fresh people or look at some other farmers markets and see how these markets have gotten new producers. It may take somebody who is really interested in doing that. It almost takes the idea of visiting farms and seeing what's available. There are lots of meetings around where farmers market management could meet new farmers and talk to them about coming in. I mean, so I don't know really how this is going to progress. I really feel like there has to balance between the craft and the farmers and that one should not overwhelm the other. It's going to take some careful consideration of what's important. Of course different things are important to different people but ... what's important to me is seeing farms being successful and people bringing in good produce, locally.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

HOUSE: Did you say there are fewer farmers now than there were when you started?

MARK: No more. There were ... when we first started it seems like there were actually more small farmers that were there. There were people who would come in with a few cut flowers and people who would sell in season only. There's a few of those people now but seems like there needs to be some provision for people who maybe have other jobs and just produce during the summer. But I think actually as producers ... there may be more production now but I think the number of people that are producers that come to the Market may be fewer. I could be wrong on that but I think that's the case.

HOUSE: I guess there was a time when all the farmers or all the farmer vendors produced.

MARK: Right.

HOUSE: All of what they sell one way or another.

MARK: There was a period of time I think in the 40s and 50s where the idea of a farmers market, 60s also, almost was non-existent. People used supermarkets. Supermarkets were new and the idea of buying local didn't seem important. But things have changed. I think people do really see the importance of buying ... or it's a value to be able to buy local. We have some friends in Vermont that are part of an organization called localvores. They have agreed that they won't buy anything that's not, for the most part, unless it's within 100 miles of where they live.

HOUSE: Produced within 100 miles?

MARK: Produced within 100 miles, right.

HOUSE: I'd rather be here than Vermont if that was my restriction. [Laughs.]

MARK: Right. [Laughs.] Well Vermont has a lot of dairy and cheeses and all kinds of ... and they can grow a lot of produce too.

HOUSE: You'd have to can or something for the winter wouldn't you?

MARK: Right. Yep.

HOUSE: So tell me about the people who help you sell at the Market. Are those local folks? Capitol Hill folks?

MARK: They are Capitol Hill folks. For years, I haven't really brought anybody with me. When my kids were young they came and helped. Probably for the last 10 years we've had people who have come to the Market and have shown an interest in plants and what is going on at the Market. I've been able to ... some of the people have agreed to help sell. There's Kirsten Oldenburg who helps and Mary Wright helps and Angie Carlson. Those three people primarily. They all are Capitol Hill people who come in and help for half a day or a full day. I enjoy having local people help because they are also knowing people in the community. So that helps us. Also I have a couple of ... well we have a little, well he's not so little anymore, a guy named Julian has been helping us since he's been about 10 years old. He comes in the morning, helps unload. His mom's name is Kim and she has a Capitol Hill landscaping business.

HOUSE: Oh, Kim Brenegar.

MARK: Yeah. And then there's a little guy that's been helping us in the afternoon. His name is Trey. I don't even know his last name. But his grandmother's name is Carolyn Cheney. Do you know Carolyn Cheney?

HOUSE: Uh uh.

MARK: Anyway, I think that's her grandson. He's just here for the summer and he helps load back up in the evening. So that's been a nice way to get to know people that these people know and it helps me have contact with the community. It's just helpful to have them and they're all good plant people. They know plants and enjoy the work. It's great fun. I think Mary Wright and Kirsten Oldenburg are connected with their local ANCs.

HOUSE: Yes.

MARK: So they are interested in the community.

HOUSE: Kirsten belongs to something called Capitol Hill Village which is ...

MARK: Capitol Hill Village, yeah.

HOUSE: ... a community ...

MARK: I've often thought about if I retired at some point maybe Capitol Hill would be the place to retire to.

HOUSE: Well that would be wonderful.

MARK: Wouldn't that be nice?

HOUSE: That would be wonderful for us and ...

MARK: Well ...

HOUSE: ... and you would already know everybody.

MARK: Right, I'd know some people. And Capitol Hill Village is such a nice idea. Where we are now, we're about 18 miles from the nearest grocery store and I don't know how that's going to work out as we get older.

HOUSE: Wow.

MARK: So the idea of having a community of people that kind of look out for each other is very appealing. I've always liked Capitol Hill for that reason. I mean even years ago I think Capitol Hill, I mean Eastern Market was a center for a community. Something you don't see very often in big cities you know. I'm sure, I mean I think of Baltimore as having communities but DC has a very nice community, in my view, Eastern Market/Capitol Hill.

HOUSE: Many people talk about this neighborhood as really being its own little community and village and the Market is certainly the center of it.

MARK: Yeah. yep.

HOUSE: Talk a little about the fire at the Market. Did you hear about that right away?

MARK: I did. I woke up ... I always turn on the radio first thing in the morning, well I have a radio alarm that is always set to WAMU and they talked about traffic tie-ups around Seventh and North Carolina. So wow, that must be close to Eastern Market and then of course that was the main story that morning. So we knew, yeah I'd heard about it right away and I knew that would affect a lot of people that we know.

HOUSE: Did you come back to the Market right away, next Saturday?

MARK: We did. The farmers' shed was not damaged. It was not a very, sales-wise, it was not a very good spring because people just ... it was kind of chaotic at the Market after that and a lot of construction. Even though our facility was not damaged it was still ... we just didn't have the traffic, you know the people coming through. One thing we did have was our regular customers kept coming and that's really what saved us. We didn't get new people like we're seeing now with the opening. But we did have people who supported us really through the whole thing. I mean they could have easily gone somewhere else to buy plants or produce or whatever but they stuck with us, even though it was not particularly pleasant shopping, you know because of the turmoil down there.

HOUSE: I shopped more at the Market during that period than I ever have before and probably since, just because it seemed important to ...

MARK: It was important. I think a lot of the people really were dependent on ... I mean a lot of ... myself included, that's our really only outlet. So we depended heavily on people coming to buy from us even though it was inconvenient. It did pick up a little bit. This spring has been difficult because of the street from March through the end of May. The street was ... we had to just carry our stuff to our stand and people were displaced so it was hard to find people that ... you're used to going to a certain place and find it.

HOUSE: Especially the farmers ...

MARK: Yeah.

HOUSE: ... were way down there on North Carolina.

MARK: Yep. So that was kind of ... it's been a difficult spring for a lot of people. We did okay but when I plan the greenhouse business it's planned in November basically because I have to order any plants that I want ... starts and seed and containers and soil mix, the whole bit. When I ordered, I had no idea that the street was going to be closed. So we do some production all winter and then in February we open everything up. So we opened up and then we found out the street was going to be closed so it was hard. But again, we were supported by the regulars enough so that we ... I think I'm going to have a pretty good year actually. We're not hurt too bad.

HOUSE: The opening day I assume was a big day?

MARK: It was. Our biggest time though is like late April and early May. And you never make up those days in July or June because people have their gardens pretty well planted.

HOUSE: Sure.

MARK: Although there's a lot of replacement plants and stuff you want to add. Gardening is nice here because if you have a small little garden you put some things in and then you wait a little bit and see what they look like and put some other things in. You don't have to do it all at once, not like planting corn.

HOUSE: [Laughs]

MARK: [Laughs] So that's a nice thing.

HOUSE: Well are there any stories that you care to share with us? Customers or relationships with other farmers or anything like that? Adventures or misadventures? Challenges, successes?

MARK: Well, I guess the exciting thing for us was when we first started. We'd come down and it was a big day. We'd been coming to the Market for a long time and we finally got up to \$500 and you know that was a big event. Celebrate. I've had some good relationships ... the person who helped me get into the Market, who has since died, but we've had a good relationship over the years and we've shared a lot of concerns about the Market and a lot successes about the Market. I think the people who help me on Saturdays, I feel like those people are kind of special people to me.

HOUSE: Your staff ...

MARK: Yeah, because they have helped me integrate into the community so I don't feel like an outsider coming in here anymore really. I feel like I belong here and I bring my things in and it's just a nice thing to have. You have a buyer and a seller and neither one of those mean anything unless you have the

Market. And the Market is the third thing that combines those and it's a different thing than either the buyer or the seller.

HOUSE: Mm hmm.

MARK: I feel like the people who helped me at the Market have helped me join that Market.

HOUSE: And you mentioned some of the other farmers who have helped you. Is there some camaraderie among the farmers, I guess you have some similar interests?

MARK: Yeah, early on we've had some ... we'd visit each others' farms some, that was helpful. I'd like to see us do more of that now but we haven't really had a lot of interaction among the farmers. I mean we come in with our stuff and unless we live in the same locality, it's hard for us to imagine what the other farms are like. And we do talk together but it's primarily talking about the Market, the problems of the Market and not so much about our farms. There is an organization that I'm a part of, it's called the Shenandoah Valley Nursery & Greenhouse Association. People involved in that are, primarily sell through their own stands or their own greenhouses. I'd like to see us do more with some kind of interaction between the farmers but I don't know exactly how that would take place but particularly if they're producing farmers we can do some tours around and see what people are doing.

HOUSE: I know a lot of the farmers are from Maryland. And I see one there has a sign that says Berkeley Springs, are there any others from Virginia there now?

MARK: Uh.

HOUSE: Some of those from Virginia I know are no longer there.

MARK: There's a fellow that is one of the newer people that comes in from Harrisonburg and he's a farmer. But I guess maybe not. Our address is officially Virginia. The Dunhams are in Back Creek. They're just a few miles from us. They've been primarily trucking but they're starting to grow some stuff. I was just talking this morning with Danny, Daniel. He said they have purchased ... they bought a used greenhouse, couple of them. So maybe they'll get into some production. I think people want to do some producing. I think it's harder sometimes to make a living, you've got a little more risk. Well, I don't know if there's more risk, you're buying things and you have a bad Saturday then you're going to end up maybe throwing some stuff away. I think people that sell at the Market basically would like to do more production. It's more interesting in a lot of ways than buying and selling.

HOUSE: I think I asked you about the future. I think we talked a little about that, did we? So is there anything else you wanted to add on ... what you might see as the future of farmers at the Market?

MARK: I have a niece that has just finished up a doctorate in, what I call chickens. [Laughs] She's in Arkansas and she's been working with free range poultry. Kind of the token of sustainable agriculture person at the University. She's currently still working for the University on some projects ... but I feel like there are lots of things going on that ultimately will change the way we look at agriculture. We still have our farm in Iowa, my brother and I own together, and we rent it out but that agriculture there is very productive and I would never say it's the wrong way to do things. But it's so different than what my niece is studying and doing which is breeds of chickens that grow slower instead of faster and have more flavor ...

HOUSE: Fewer antibiotics and hormones?

MARK: Exactly. Yeah. And if they're raised on pasture they get different nutrients and so forth. I do feel like there is just a lot going on and I think a lot of markets ... and again, I think Eastern Market has to be careful not to lose out on some of these new farmers that are really doing some interesting things. Because there are other farmers markets around and it's possible that we could get some of these people into this Market and if we wait too long they'll be in other established markets. No, I think it's a very hopeful time. I mean, I'm excited about agriculture now because there's openings for all kinds of new ways of production and marketing.

HOUSE: I don't think I have any other questions.

MARK: Okay.

HOUSE: I don't know if you have anything that you'd like to add?

MARK: No, I think I just appreciate this kind of interest that you all have in the Market. I think everything that is done to promote the Market and to have an interest in the community it helps us and I think we can be a kind of mutual benefit.

HOUSE: Definitely. Well, thank you very much.

MARK: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW