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Interview with Troy Cooper

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Troy Cooper

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Researcher's name: Chris Meyers

Event: Interview with Troy Cooper

Place: OSU Extension Office, Knox County,
Mt. Vernon, OH

I walked into the Ohio State University extension office for Knox County at approximately 1:25pm. The small office was quiet, except for a man behind a desk on the phone in the back of the main room. The main room was long and narrow, with a counter about four feet high on my left as I walked in. The room smelled somewhat like plastic, like most offices often do. A woman behind the desk welcomed me, and I informed her that I was there to see Mr. Cooper. It turned out that he was the one on the phone, so I had a seat and waited for him to finish. I made a last minute check of my equipment – a Sony walkman recorder. A couple of minutes later he got off the phone, and we introduced ourselves and went to his office. Troy is a middle aged husky man of average height. On this particular day, he was dressed casually with a button down shirt tucked into his jeans and no tie. The office was small, with piles all over his desk, table, and chairs. It was a mix of professional and casual, with a bookshelf full of records, and the Mount Vernon News on his desk. I sat down at the corner of his desk, across from Mr. Cooper. At this point, we made some small talk. I talked about where I was from, while he talked about his past work with the rural life center. Eventually I said, “let’s get started,” and put my tape-recorder on the corner of the desk in between the two of us. Before we got started, he wanted to know what I was going to be asking him about, so I ran through my topics with him prior to the formal interview. This allowed him to pull out some books and get some figures to bring up. After he was prepared, we began. After my introduction and first question, he began to speak, and I noticed that the counter on the tape was not moving. I stopped him, and checked the recorder to find that the pause switch had somehow become engaged in the last five minutes. I apologized, switched it off, and we started again. The interview began with Troy discussing the various types of food produced in the county. In terms of sheep numbers, we are the second largest county in the state, and contain the largest market east of the Mississippi. We also have a fair amount of beef cattle, and are the 11th largest county in terms of dairy production. This is used for milk, ice cream, etc. We are 4th in terms of hay production and our corn and soybean crops have recently been rising in number. Also, recently more specialty foods have appeared such as strawberries, Indian Corn, blueberries, honeybees, apples, and wine.

Next, I asked Troy about change taking part in our production. He answered by explaining that 50 years ago, our main source of food was livestock. Recently there has been a shift from livestock to grain – primarily corn and soybeans. The size of farms has been going up, while the actual number has been going down. There has been a significant reduction in the dairy industry, as well as the sheep industry. The only area of increase is in that of small fruits. He speculated that the increase in small fruits is because of the assumption that it is less work. Many of the people taking up this type of

farming are new to farming and moving into the county from more urban areas. At this point, I asked him about the seasons, and how they affect production. September-November is the big harvest time for the grain products, and the same is true for cattle and sheep. Pigs are fairly consistent throughout the year, and fruits are usually on during the summer.

After this, I asked about the major issues facing farmers today. He said that operating costs are going up, while revenues are going down. There is a loss of the market due to the global economy. There is, however, a possibility to grow without becoming commercial. Troy would like to see the local consumption of food. He feels that people want to know where their food is coming from. Next, I asked who is buying locally. He said that this is primarily a group of middle-old aged because they are the ones raising families and have the most disposable income. These families also fall into the middle to upper income bracket. He also noted, however, that the college age group is gradually becoming more interested in buying locally. My next question was if locally grown foods would cost more than traditional supermarket food. Troy said not necessarily. Some of the time it will, but if there are people around to help (like himself) to help producers cutting costs of production, they can reduce the cost/unit that the consumer has to pay.

Next I asked about where the food goes when it leaves the farm. He said it goes to Michigan, Pennsylvania, Kansas, etc. There are very few slaughterhouses in this country, so after food is purchased locally at an auction, it often travels far out of state just to reach the slaughterhouse. There it is processed, shipped to storage, and usually cut again before it reaches the grocery level. This means it travels through four to five hands, and in the process, everyone takes their cut. The person who grows or raises the food gets the least amount of anyone. This is essentially because they cannot set the price, but are forced to take a price given to them at the auction. Keeping food local allows the farmers to have control over their prices, and would be economically advantageous for the farmers. The next question that I asked was about how much food stays in the county. He told me that not very much at all does, although he would like to see it go up. Those who do sell locally sell directly – sometimes off of their porch, sometimes at the farmers market. At the farmers market, the food sold represents the diversity in the county as a whole.

For my next question, I asked if a farmer is able to alter what they produce at different times of the year. He said that cattle can essentially be produced year round, while sheep are harder to do this with. This is because females are only in heat in the fall, although it depends on the breed. In terms of agriculture, however, he said that a farm could change the fruits and vegetables that it produces and when it produces them within a year. I then asked what it would take for a farmer to do this. He said that they would need to know that there is money to be made and that a market exists. At this point, I asked him to talk to me about the benefits of setting up a local food network. He said that the food is fresh, and more nutritious. Furthermore, the network builds a social relationship between the consumer and the seller.

Here, Troy mentioned that he was trying something of the sort, but it was still in its early stages. He has received calls from several local institutions that have an interest in purchasing local products. Troy has also begun speaking with livestock and other commodity groups. The biggest problem he has encountered is unifying commodity

groups, because farmers are such independent people by nature. The institutions that he suggests targeting are educational, restaurants, hospitals, rest homes, etc. I then asked him about the potential risks posed by the endeavor. He said that the largest task we face is making sure that farmers pace themselves and develop a plan in advance. Another foreseeable problem is that if it grows too quickly, the farmers could lose again loose control of setting their price. He used the example of the Ocean Spray Corporation, and how it started as a conglomerate of local farmers, and soon after turned into a big business. If this were to take place, the major changes that farmers would need to do would be to use more land, which is available. Institutions face risks in receiving a constant and steady supply. This is a problem because of seasonality and drought. Yet, he feels that all of this could be worked out with contracts. The slow times of year could be worked out with a contract with a national distributor who could provide food during the slow times of the year. This would also only be a problem with certain vegetables. Meat could be available year round, as well as smaller vegetables that could be grown in a greenhouse. Yet, with a greenhouse, costs are added to production, which means the food would cost more. I asked him what a restaurant owner would ask a farmer who came to him, and Troy said he would care about two things: quality and consistency (although I personally feel that cost would be included too). Troy said that the local farms could provide both of those things. Beef, chicken, eggs, and dairy are all available year round.

My next question was what could a local food market do for the country. He felt that many parts of the community in Knox County are centered on food. Having a local market would allow people to get to know their neighbors better. Furthermore, they would be able to appreciate what goes into making their food. Hence, a local food market could mean a more unified community. Social relationships in the county are very much based on food production and consumption, and people could have a tighter knit community with a better understanding of those around them with the creation of a local market. Finally, Mr. Cooper made some notes about organic farming vs. non-organic farming, basically saying that people often rely on their labels such as certified organic to tell them if their food is good. If their neighbor produces the food they are eating, they could walk over and see exactly how their food is being produced rather than relying on a tag or label.

At this point, I asked if there was anything else that he would like to add, and Mr. Cooper said no. I shook his hand and thanked him once again, and as we walked back into the main office, I handed him a release form. He signed it and I said goodbye and headed out the door and back to the car.