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Interview with Mary Carver

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Mary Carver

Troy Cooper

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Researcher's name: Elena Rue

Event: Interview with Mary Carver

Place: Colgin Road

Interview Transcript

On Friday February 2, 2001 I interviewed Troy Cooper in his office at her home. I used a Sony tape recorder.

ER: This is Elena Rue interviewing Mary Carver at her home on Colgin Road. How did you begin with farming?

MC: Well we moved out here about six years ago and when we originally came out here we were raisy Shetland sheep dogs. It was becoming evident to us that if we were going to raise dogs and be successful with it we'd have to hire a handler and it was getting to the point where it was costing \$1500 to champion a dog. It was just becoming too much travelling and too much money to expect to make anything. So as we came out here and had more land we decided that we'd put some critters on the land in order to keep from mowing it all the time so obviously sheep were natural. As we got into it, we bought 12 to start with, and as we got into we decided that this was the thing we wanted to do. I went up to talk to Allen Brinker at that time at the Extension Office and my idea was to get the little bitty Shetland sheep to go with my Shetland sheep dogs! I thought that sounded reasonable, but when I talked to him he said Shetland sheep cost about \$800 a piece to get started. He said I should get a different kind of sheep that were cheap that I could learn on and with that we started off with Cheviots which were also relatively small. He helped me find some mixed breed Cheviots and that's how we got started. From there we've moved on to doing different things.

ER: Did you grow up in Knox County?

MC: No, I grew up in Illinois 100 miles from Chicago and my husband grew up in Maryland near DC.

ER: Did you move here for other jobs and then come out here?

MC: Yeah, we came out to Ohio because that's where my husband's job ended up being.

ER: Did you move right to this farm or were you in town first?

MC: No, my kids grew up in the Sunbury area and it just got to crowded. We didn't like it anymore so when they graduated from high school and were in college we moved.

ER: Was there something specific about the farming lifestyle that drew you to it or did you just fall into it?

MC: I think I've always liked it. When were kids, we lived in town, but our thing was to go to the park and then from the park we'd cross the fence and go into some farmer's fields and just walk around - that kind of stuff. My husband did the same thing, he went their farms all the time. We've always liked animals, that's how we got started with the dogs, then we sort of graduated on.

ER: Had you had any previous farming experience or your husband?

MC: Well, we sort of just gathered it along the way. When we lived down in Sunbury we had five acres and we started out with ponies and horses and I got involved with the dogs and the horses with 4-H, we just sort of learned as we went along.

ER: Do you feel that you've found your niche or do think you'll keep on changing what you're doing out here? Do you think you're constantly experimenting with things?

MC: I think it will keep growing. We've sort of found our niche as you say, but at the same time the more you're with animals the more you see things that have to change.

ER: Do you feel that you radically changed your lifestyle when you came out here? Or were there things you feel you had to change once you started becoming a farmer?

MC: Well, yeah there were things that we changed because you don't run into Columbus shopping like we did. There's a lot of things we don't do, but on the other hand we do a lot of other things that we enjoy as much or more.

ER: Do you feel that you're in a farming community here? Or are you guys sort of separate from that?

MC: We're in the farming community. A lot of things we do locally here that have to do with farming or farm products or things like that, but at the same time my husband is still very involved in Columbus 'cos he drives in everyday and works there. It's changed a lot of how he does things. Not so much what he does, but how he does it because he spends an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half when he comes home so he loses three hours a day. There are some things that he has to save for the weekends.

ER: What do you feel are the biggest challenges for you guys as new farmers?

MC: Probably because of the farm we bought, this farm was probably founded right after the civil war, along the way there was a period somewhere in the 50s-80s that it wasn't really farmed well and the land hasn't been taken care of. Probably since the 50s nothing's been done to the land and that's been our biggest thing. Trying to bring the fields back to being able to be useful in growing the forage the way they should.

ER: Do you feel that's your contribution to the area?

MC: I think so. That's part of the fun of it too. To bring it back and see what it is.

ER: Do you think you've been well received by the older farmers in the area? Part of what I'm talking about in this article is are old farmers...

MC: Most of them have been real helpful to us if you ask them something. They're really willing to give you their advice and help you, but at the same time I think they look at me and say, "Silly city farmer!" At least when we first came out here we didn't have the equipment. They have these big tractors and all this stuff, and I'm out there with my lawn and garden tractor doing things that they would do with a big tractor. I think they drive the house and think sill city farmer.

ER: Do you think that you relate to the farmers in the area well or do you think there's sort of a gap since you guys have come different backgrounds.

MC: I don't know, we're a small farm and I think there's a definite gap between small farmers like ourselves and guys that have 200-300 acres. They do it full time and expect to make their living off of it where we expect to make money, but we don't expect to live off of it.

ER: When you came here did you actively try to become part of the community or did you try to go places and join groups like the grange?

MC: We don't do the grange, we've thought about it, but we really haven't had an opportunity to get involved with it. Mostly we've worked through the extension office and we've gone to classes that they've offered. We've gone on different farm tours and that kind of thing.

ER: Do you think you've met a lot of farmers on a day to day basis.

MC: I wouldn't say a lot simply because farming is sort of an individual thing. You stay home and you do your work.

ER: Do you feel that you had to prove yourself to other people before they took you seriously? Some farmers say that everyone was really skeptical, but after a couple years they started taking them seriously.

MC: I'm not sure that I particularly feel that way I guess I didn't really care much if they took me seriously or not. As long as we were progressing slowly like we wanted to do. There's been little things that we're slighted with. For instance we tried to get lime to put on our land and I went in a year ago and ordered the lime and they kept saying, "Yeah, we'll bring it when it dries out." Well it was dry, at least in my fields it was dry you could have run any kind of a truck on it. It took them a full year to get it to me. I know they were probably taking lime to these...and they would say so. They would say, "We have to take to this corn farmer and that corn farmer and get it out before this guy gets his crops in." Well, my crop is grass and forage and it's not growing 'cos my land needs the lime so we were held up for a year trying to get lime brought out.

ER: Do you feel that that's happened in other areas as well? The big farmers are favored over smaller farmers?

MC: I'm not sure. That's the more specific one. The other being that sometimes...(we buy all our hay), which saves us buying all the big equipment and saves all the time it takes to make the hay, but at the same time that means you're scrambling to find it all the time to get the kind you want. I had contracted verbally with a guy last summer to buy 500 bails of hay and I called a couple times during the summer and he'd say that it was not quite ready. And he called me one time and said, "I can't bring you this crop of hay it got wet." Which was okay. So we were waiting for hay and called around September and asked and he had his third cutting of alfalfa yet and he said, "I've got it and I'll bring you out some to look at tomorrow." Well the next day when we was supposed to be coming out he called and said, "I have a guy with a big truck coming in and he bought it all." So I'm like, "Okay, now what do I do?" So then you start all over and find hay.

ER: What benefits do you feel you bring to the community as new farmers? Do you feel that you bring new perspectives?

MC: Probably perspectives and enthusiasm. It's all new to us and every time something happens we think it's cool. I think some of these guys have grown up on a farm and it was old to them when they were 18.

ER: Do you think you guys are open to new ideas and techniques that older farmers would...

MC: I think that's probably true 'cos they grew up learning from they're fathers and grandfathers. So the tried old way that's always worked, why try something else? We have no idea where to start and we go and say, "Hey! How do we do this?" And if they tell you a new way you don't know any better so just go ahead and do it the way they're telling you to do it.

ER: Do you think your attitudes towards farming are different than the old farmers?

MC: Our perspective might be a little different than some because this is a secondary income for us. I don't think on the acreage we have anybody could make a fulltime living on it. But that doesn't mean you can't make supplemental. Where is what we have in mind for down the road. We're in our fifties so we're thinking about retirement. We'd like to be able to get a supplemental income off the farm.

ER: Do you think your lifestyles and values are similar to people in the area?

MC: I think they probably are. My family goes back to Iowa farmers.

ER: Oh, I'm from Iowa.

MC: What part of Iowa?

ER: Decorah, it's in the northeast corner.

MC: My family was in Clinton, along the river more. From our background I went to my grandfather's farm when I was real little and I spent summers on cousins farms. And my husband the same. He had uncles that were dairy farmers in New England. So, family wise we go back to farmers.

ER: Do you think it was always in your blood?

MC: It might be. My dad was not a farmer, but he enjoyed gardening.

ER: That's a lot of the same working with the land. A lot of other people have said one of the reasons they start farming is to get back to the land.

MC: I think it's more the peace and quiet. I like to just sit and watch nature. Out here we have some fascinating animals. We have a couple, I think they're red tailed hawks, but they're pure white. People that come out in this area when they first see them say, "Oh man that's cool!" And they run around with cameras and everyone's trying to get pictures and you can't get close enough to them to get a really good picture. We keep asking anybody who comes out who might know something.

ER: What do you think about small farming in the future? I know a lot of people think it's a dying thing.

MC: I think it's going to be there just because a certain number of people like the countryside. I think it's a shame that the kids in the city don't even know if they want to be farmers because they've never had the opportunity to be out in the country and spend any time there to see what they feel like after they've been there a while. Kids that grow up on the farm, some of them aren't going to stay on the farm. Some of them are going to navigate into the cities and take jobs that require them to be in the cities.

ER: Are there many other people in the area that you know of that are in the same situation as you coming in from the city?

MC: I can't really think of any. My neighbor over here has 5-10 acres and her works in Mt. Vernon, but he's not raising anything he just enjoys his lamb. Another neighbor has 10 acres and she's got a few sheep and a horse – just a few things, but husband too works in town. I think most of the people on smaller farms also have at least one person that works in town.

ER: Do you think they consider themselves farmers?

MC: Some do and some don't. We consider ourselves farmers simply because we have more animals probably than any city farmer would have.

ER: Where do you sell? Do you sell your sheep for meat?

MC: We sell ours for meat and we're slowly getting the top prices that we need to get. We sell them in Mt. Vernon at the grocers. We have a secondary product, which is our wool. We sell that locally to the handspinners and we're starting to sell it over the web.

ER: Is that a recent development.

MC: That's a recent thing we tried this winter and we're going to do it again. We put some on ebay and it sold pretty well. We're going to do some more that way and we're working on putting up a website for the farm.

ER: Do you sell a lot of you wool locally?

MC: One of the little stores in town, Craftsman Hill, has some of my wool that she keeps in her store all the time. It sold fairly well.

ER: Do you sell some of you meat on your own.

MC: No, we really don't. To me I get just as good a price going into producers as I do if I have to go through all the extra trouble. I haven't seen that you get that much more money.

ER: What do you feel about the local food market around here? Do you think it's healthy?

MC: I think it's good. If people want to buy it straight from the farm that's the way to go. We used to, when the kids were home, buy a half of beef, and I prefer to buy that directly from the farmers if I can. You know who they are and what they fed them. We've always lived rurally. Don't know if it would make a lot of difference if I was in Columbus. I might just go to one of the locker plants and buy it there. I just want to make sure it's USDA inspected so why not just go to the guys who are butchering it?

ER: I think you've answered most of my questions. Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you think is relevant?

MC: I can't think of anything, but if we go out and take a tour and walk around and see the place I'm sure you'll come up with a lot of different ideas of what you want to know.

ER: This is Elena Rue interviewing Mary Carver on February 8, 2001.